

Authors Note: Obligatory denial of ownership. Rowling owns Harry and Friends. Heinlein's estate owns a cat named Pixel. I own a computer and a small dementor statue named Bob.

So, in the words of Chris DeBurgh, "don't pay the ferryman."

Someone to Love

Each morning I get up, I die a little  
Can't barely stand on my feet  
Take a look in the mirror and cry  
"Lord what you're doing to me?"

-Queen—

Chapter 1: Not a Dry Eye in the House

Your every line had the sweetest sound.  
Your every touch turned my world around.  
But then the light came up and my world crashed down.  
End of show - it's over.

-Meatloaf-

It was over.

Nobody actually came out and said those words, but that was the sentiment in the castle. It was over. The fear. The death. Over, gone, done with. Fire-whisky and mead and mulled wine flowed like the millennium had turned early and water was out of style. Goblets were raised and toasts were called with increasing volume. The names of the dead were recited, with respect for those on our side, with contempt for those on the other.

The fools.

Dead was dead. It didn't matter if you were magical or muggle, free or slave, rich or poor, you were all the same. Death, the great equalizer.

They'd opened up Hogwarts Great Hall, put me up on the high table. The same seat were Professor Dumbledore had sat. Where Severus had.

Odd that. I'd spent so many years hating him, loathing his existence as much as he loathed mine. Was it an act? I couldn't tell. Right now I'd say probably not, that he despised me because I was just one more example where James Potter had gone one up on him...and because of me the one thing he cared anything about was killed. Didn't mean he wasn't brave, just that he was a rotten bastard to everyone around him.

Even now I couldn't call him 'Professor' Snape. Too many bad memories, petty torments, and detentions between us. I still hate the memory of who he was, but it's hard to hate a person who's dying in front of you, dying for you, all so that the two of you can have a slice of revenge.

Who was it that said revenge was best served cold? I don't know. Don't particularly care. They were wrong. Revenge is best served hot, the temperature of freely flowing blood, the temperature of spilled intestines and a just-dead corpse.

Fleur had suggested getting a pike to 'display 'ez 'ead properly'.

People forget what's under her surface. Forget that veela glamour and the pretty witch are only skin deep. There's a reason why she was chosen by the Goblet of Fire. Beneath the French designer clothes and pretty face was a Warrior Queen out of an old bard's tale with more dueling tournament titles than Gilderoy Lockheart had 'most charming smile' awards.

I told her to leave him where he lay. Plenty of time in the morning to begin documenting everything (on Shacklebolt's insistence) and cleaning up.

Let the dead bury the dead.

Only the dead have seen the end of war.

All the little trite phrases we've come up with. Right now I'm partial to 'there's nothing more terrible than a battle won, except a battle lost'.

I was so damned tired of it. I wanted to go and sleep, but knew that even if I managed that all I'd get were nightmares. I thought about going to Madam Pomfrey for a dreamless sleep potion, but she's the

only one who isn't down here celebrating...well, her and those too badly injured to come down but not so bad off that they were transferred to St. Mungo's.

Besides, one dreamless night once in a while isn't a problem. But I can feel so many nightmares crowding at the edges of my mind that one night wouldn't be enough. Would never be enough.

Bad things come to those that abuse dreamless sleep potions.

Someone tries to press a goblet of mead into my hand. I hold up a goblet (the golden one they insist I use, the same one Dumbledore used) filled with pumpkin juice that I charmed to look like fire whisky. It's enough to get them to leave me alone as someone, Vance?—no, Vance is dead, maybe a sister—proposes another toast to the departed.

I pretend to drink. I pretend out of respect. I don't drink because even pumpkin juice tastes foul and bitter on my tongue.

The tables have been pushed away from one of the big hearths that line the walls, and the Centaurs are clustered around it with barrels of their forest-brewed beer set on their flat sides and the other opened so that you can just dip right in. A couple have drums, and one a reed flute, and four more have actual bag-pipes and they get into another song as soon as the toast was over. McGonagall already had them do Scotland, the Brave, and led everyone in the school song to it (twice).

"Flowers of the Forest."

I turn to find Shacklebolt sitting next to me.

"I'm leading the Provisional Ministry until we can get everything reorganized. Elections a year from today."

"Good for you," I manage. He looks like the only other person here who isn't well on their way to being completely smashed.

"I want you."

Maybe not. I had my obligatory sip of fire whisky when I turned seventeen. Even had one earlier when the party started. The

Durslys, especially Vernon and Marge, made me a firm believer in the evils of alcohol at an early age. Aside from teaching me how to run really fast, it's one of the few lessons that I'm actually thankful of them for.

"You didn't wait long before moving in, did you?" I asked coldly.

He frowned, "What do you mean?"

"Ginny just died," I said, managing not to grind my teeth.

Shacklebolt blinked, then shook his head. "Sorry, I meant I want you as part of my Provisional Ministry."

"No chance." I didn't even need to think about it.

"Please?"

"No."

"It's what—"

"If you tell me it's what Dumbledore, or Ginny, or anyone else would have wanted, I'm going to curse you."

He stopped.

"I can't do this job alone, Harry," he said.

"That's nice."

"I already have someone for DMLE," he continued.

"Uh-huh."

"I just need you to run one little sub-department," he said. "That Weasley boy, Perce-something? He's already agreed to handle the admin side so you'll have minimal paperwork."

"In the Department of Law Enforcement," I said.

He nodded happily.

"Who's the head?" I asked.

"Connie Hammer," he said. "She was an Auror, transferred to the Law Enforcement Patrol, ended up running their Recon unit."

"You had a unit called LEPRecon?" I asked.

He nodded, "They're to the LEP what the Hit-wizards are to the Aurors."

"So you want me to have her old job?" I asked.

He nodded happily.

"No."

"Please?"

"You tried that already," I pointed out.

"What else are you going to do, Harry?" he asked. "Sit alone in that big house all day."

"There's an idea," I said. "Seamus!"

Finnegan looked up at me from where he'd been getting ready to sing again.

"Four times is enough, give Danny Boy a break."

He frowned and tried to count on his fingers. Most of the hall was half-wasted. Seamus was well-past half-way.

"This'll be the last time," I sighed.

"Oh, right then. Oh Danny Boy, the pipes the pipes..."

I tuned it out before I could hear the pipes again. Shackbolt had a point, as much as I didn't want to admit it. And, hell, Percy had practically lived at the Ministry. There was probably so much crap to muck out that I wouldn't have to even bother with sleep.

The idea had merit.

"All right," I said.

"Good," Shacklebolt said. He plopped a leather folder down in front of me. The kind that muggle detectives carry their badges around in.

I opened it. "Chief Auror?" I growled.

"Connie was a Senior Auror. Since I'm moving out, that makes you the ranking Auror," he smirked. "Have fun with your department, Chief." He turned and sauntered away.

The bastard.

I wanted to leave. Wanted to be anywhere but here. But the people needed their damned hero.

"Winky," I said.

The house-elf popped into existence next to me. She looked...better than I had seen her last. Mostly cleaned up of the butterbeer addiction, but Dobby's death had hit her hard. Dobby's death had hit everyone hard.

"I need food," I said. "Something simple that I can eat with my hands. Meat pastries or something." I didn't want to eat but the Dursleys had taught me that you don't eat when you want, you eat when you can or you won't have energy to run later.

She nodded and started to pop away, but I put my hand on her shoulder and stopped her. "Professor Snape's quarters, do they have a guest room or a study that doesn't have anything powerfully magical or dangerous? I'm going to be staying there at least tonight and there will be an infant staying as well."

Winky nodded. "Professor Snape was liking his privacy, Master Harry Potter Sir, but yes, there is a room like that."

"Good," I said. "I need one room, or a couch if need be, to sleep in myself, one crib or bassinet for a baby, and a room with a bed for one intoxicated Auror who is likely not going to take well to waking up someplace strange. That room should have immediate access to a lav, she's had a lot to drink."

Winky nodded. "What else, sir?"

"What time is it now?"

"Nearly two in the morning, Master Harry Potter Sir."

"Wake up call for eight," I said, gritting my teeth. "Have hot food ready, lots of it. Coffee for Tonks, hot cocoa for me." I'd come to heartily despise the illusion of energy caffeine gave. Theobromine—and wasn't Hermione wonderful for teaching me that word—was a much more civilized stimulant but the Aurors, I knew, ran on the stuff. "Have a bottle and baby things ready, warming charm on the bottle, whatever else you think appropriate."

"Next," I continued. "I need you to go to Number 12 Grimmauld Place. Kreacher, who worked in the kitchens here year before last, should be there. Tell him that I want the house cleaned thoroughly, top to bottom. I want all of the dark artifacts and books, all of the portraits, stripped from one floor, tell him to pick which one. I want one room set up for an infant. Crib, changing table, rocking chair, and the like. Would he be able to enchant the ceiling?"

Winky shook her head. "Wes cannot be doing magic like that, Master Harry Potter Sir."

"Fine," I said. "Leave it for now. I want two bedrooms on that floor. At least one should have an inner door that connects to the nursery. If there is such a set of suitable rooms on one floor that he doesn't need to make changes that'd be excellent, but safety from dark objects comes first."

Winky nodded.

"Okay, um, tell him he can access my vaults to buy anything he needs to accomplish my directives. I want the kitchen stocked with non-perishables, but only the basics for the perishable items. Tell Kreacher we're going to have a talk in the future about coloring schemes and the like, as well as what to do with the more questionable items. Also tell him that sooner or later my Godson is going to end up staying there and the portrait of Sirius' mother is going to behave. If she can't I'll get rid of her. I'll remove the entire wall she's anchored to and replace it if I have to. Also let him know

that I won't be moving back permanently until the security issues can be addressed.

"Are you bound to Hogwarts, or are you still a free elf?"

The abrupt question took her by surprise.

"Winky is bound to Hogwarts now, Master Harry Potter Sir," she admitted.

"Fine, would you be interested in being bound to me?" As much as I trusted Kreacher, I didn't trust him just as much. Plus, if I remembered right, Winky was around when Barty Jr. was young. That made her useful. Also, since I was going to be directing the Aurors, having a house-elf I trusted may prove very useful.

"Oh," her eyes were so wide that I thought they were going to fall out. "Oh yes," she said. "Oh yes, Master Harry Potter Sir, Winky would like that more than anything."

"Fine, consider it done. We'll talk with the Headmistress and get everything done nice and formal later.

"One rule," I held up a finger.

Her wide eyes went wider, in fear this time, but I ignored it.

"You are limited to two names when you address me. I don't much care for 'master' anything, but 'Master Harry' is fine. Pick what you want."

She nodded.

"Good, go on and get to work. I'm going to try getting Tonks down to Professor Snape's quarters in a bit, so bring me food, and then start down there."

She nodded and popped out.

If I could have I'd have gotten Tonks started down already. Merlin knows how Teddy was managing to sleep through this. One of the Hufflepuffs who had decided to stay behind and help Madam Pomfrey had brought him down just before the party started.



Unfortunately Tonks didn't look near to the point yet where she'd stumble along as I directed without asking any questions.

A moment later a dozen meat rolls appeared before me, along with three fruit-filled pastries.

The party was finally starting to die down. People were struggling through floos. Those who couldn't floo were being shown the direction of vacant guest rooms and unused staff quarters. Those who were still students were struggling to house dormitories not caring of House.

If it had been a couple of years ago the Sorting Hat would have torn itself a new one. Apparently alcohol was another Great Equalizer.

Alcohol and Death.

I was pretty sure there was something thought-provoking and profound in that but I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

I finally was able to escape from the Siege Perilous (another thing to thank the Dursleys for, I guess. Dudley's bookcase in his second bedroom, complete with unread books).

Teddy was just starting to wake up when I got to them.

Decisions, decisions.

Do I carry the cute Godson? Or do I carry the passed-out-drunk/grieving-widow/quasi-aunt/friend/future-colleague?

I know which one I wanted to carry. Unfortunately it was easier to charm the levitating porta-crib to follow along ahead of me and put feather-light charms on the aforementioned auror than it was to carry the levitating porta-crib and charm the auror to float along behind me.

I know, charm the auror. Bad taste in words even if the closest thing I had to an uncle (her husband) hadn't just been killed. Sue me, I'm tired. That's why I resorted to magic in the first place instead of carrying her down without it.

It'd been a long day. I united the damned Hollows for the first time in ever. For thirty seconds I'd been the Master of Death. I'd been hit with the killing curse (again) and lived (again), and let me tell you, getting hit with that spell takes a lot out of you. I'd just been subjected to hours of partying for something that I felt there was damn little reason to celebrate about.

Oh sure, there was a great sigh of relief when I realized that at least that was over. That there was no way that bastard was coming back. Was it worth it? If he'd offered to let me and Ginny go as long as we never opposed him, would I have done it? I didn't want to answer that question right now. If I did, well... Maybe in the future I could say that yes, it was worth it. Right now it just hurt, and I was tired.

I trudged down the stone stairs into the dungeons. I'd never been in this part of them. I knew where the Slytherin Commons were, where the different potion labs were. But I'd never been near Severus Snape's private apartments before. I hadn't need to. My feet took me right there.

There was a painting there. Of a woman with red hair in a white gown. Draped across her shoulders and wrapped around her so that its head hovered above her upturned right hand was a serpent.

I spoke the password even before the painting had a chance to address me.

It was amazing what learning a few things about someone you hate's motivation. Lessons with Dumbledore where I thought I learned nothing, I'd learned the basic fundamentals of Tom Riddle's psyche that drove him to do what he did. Learning a few things about Severus turned him from a cold, sarcastic, coward into one of the bravest (though no less cold or sarcastic) men I'd ever met.

It begs the question of what would have happened if I'd let the Hat put me in his house. Would I have recognized what was going on inside him seven years sooner? (Probably not, given that he played Voldemort for a fool and even Dumbledore, I suspect, never realized the true depths of his feelings). Would he have managed what he'd never done in this life and recognize the parts of me that were so much the same as him?

So very similar, the two of us: Vernon and Tobias, Eileen and Petunia. And yet so different as well. He had a friend who he lost, whereas I. I never had a friend, and found them.

I'd never seen his apartments, and yet, they seemed to fit the man perfectly. Not the cold bat-like figure that lurked over a cauldron, but the man. Warm reds (not the eye-searing scarlet of Gryffindor) and earth-tone browns predominated. Crystal spheres produced a gentle, soothing light. A wireless collected dust in one corner, the walls were paneled with some dark wood—where they weren't lined with bookcases. Thick rugs covered the stone floors, and even the ceiling was charmed. The only stone was the red brick chimney of a magnificent fireplace on the wall opposite a battered, but comfortable-looking, brown leather couch.

Winky was waiting and she took the porta-crib and the fussing Ted.

"Just a moment," I told him. "Let me get your Mum in bed first."

Winky hummed something and one of her long ears dipped towards a door that was already open.

The room was spartan, but well decorated. Green and browns predominated. The wall paneling matched the wood of the four-poster, chest of drawers, bedside cabinet, and wardrobe. There was a painting at the head of the bed, a winter scene in a forest of pine-trees where a pack of wolves has just pulled down a stag. The green comforter and the bed-hangings matched the trees, a rug on the floor, like an abstract stained glass window caught the scarlet-blood in the painting.

I laid Tonks on the bed, pull off her boots and pulled the comforter over her before turning to the painting. It isn't a wizarding painting. The wolves and stag are perfectly still. How long did Severus stare at it. How many nights did he come in here. The whole room was designed around it. A room that he never intended for use, a room that never was used. A room that was no more than an excuse to get a muggle painting.

It said things about him that he'd furnish a room so well simply so that the woods matched the wood-tones from the paintings. The bed-clothes matched the greens of the trees. And that solitary rug by

the bed pulled out the midnight-blue of the winter sky, the white of the snow, the green and brown of the trees, the red of the blood...

I opened the door to the attached lavatory and a tap of the wand makes the globular lights glow gently. I had to see about getting some of my own. Gas lights are all well and good, but they still leave me feeling trapped in a muggle museum. I wanted either electric lights, or something magical that didn't look and feel so...dated. I left the door to the lav cracked open so that she could find it when she woke, and left the door to the living room open so that she knew she wasn't trapped.

Winky had set up a crib in Severus' office. It was neat and tidy, as I expected of him. The walls were lined with more bookcases, filled with potion texts and resources. A row of filing cabinets clearly labeled by year and alphabetically. I tried to imagine the dour Potion Master as I changed my godson for the first time on his desk under the supervision of a recovering-alcoholic house-elf.

She could have done it just as well, a point she had made sure she had let 'Master Harry Sir' know. Since I'd managed to wean her off one word I wasn't going to press tonight. I'd refused. Refused to even use magic. Some things are just too important to trivialize with a swish of a wand and a word. At least the first time you do them.

Besides, I was so tired of everything that there was no way I was going to risk using a new piece of magic. I don't care how safe and fool-proof anyone insisted it was.

The short of it is, Teddy made a mess. I cleaned it up while he grinned and gurgled. Winky held him and cooed while I vanished the mess and cleaned my hands. Some things are too smelly not to use magic on.

Winky had a bottle all ready for me when I reached for it. Teddy's hair went Chudley Cannon orange as he drained the bottle with indecent hast. When he finished he belched loudly, curled up in my arms, and began snoring as his hair changed to a soft buttery-yellow. I set him in the crib and the empty bottle was easily transfigured into a plush werewolf. Teddy grabbed it instinctively and began slurping on the tufted tail.

Baby and transfigured toy went in the crib.

I headed for the door, only to pause when I noticed two shelves lacked books.

"I was putting them in a different room, Master Harry Sir," Winky said. "Thems not being books yours be wanting around a baby."

I nodded my thanks and left the room, leaving the door open, and headed for the couch. Then I stopped, there was one last thing I had to do, though it was already so late in the night, or early, depending on your way of thinking, that I hesitated to do so. A simple wood fire, some floo powder, and an address and I found myself staring into a dimly lit room.

"Hello?" I asked softly. I didn't want to wake anyone if I didn't have to.

A figure shifted on a chair. Andromeda Tonks had been curled around an end-pillow and an afghan was draped around her shoulders, but dim light and a tear-streaked face didn't hide the same beauty her sisters had possessed.

"Harry?" she asked.

"It's over," I said. "He, Voldemort, is dead."

"You're sure?" she asked.

"There's a body this time," I said. "He's dead, and he's not coming back."

"Good," she said tightly. "How...how bad was it?"

I sighed, "Bad."

"Is...are Nymphadora and Remus..."

"Tonks is fine," I said. "Remus...Remus is dead."

She gave a soft, dry sob. "I'm sorry," she said after a moment. "I know you were...close."

I nodded.

"Is Nymphadora coming here, or are..." she hesitated. "Has she made other arraignments?"

"She's staying at Hogwarts," I said. "There was something of a victory bash and I was only just now able to get away from it," I fudged slightly. "She got pretty wasted. I have her and Teddy sleeping in the most secure quarters I know of, and I'm on the couch so if someone does try again they'll have to go through me first."

She nodded gratefully. "What happened?"

"Voldemort is dead, so is Remus," I repeated. "Severus Snape was working against him all the time, he gave me what I needed to finish the job, but he's dead too. Fred Weasley is dead, as is Ginny and..."

I stopped, I couldn't say more.

"Oh Harry," she said softly. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know her well, but Tonks and I spoke often enough to know that she was special."

I nodded.

"Are," she hesitated. "Cissy and Bella, are they..."

"Bellatrix is dead," I said.

She flinched but didn't say anything. No love lost there, but they'd been sisters, at least once upon a time. Some things are too hard to forget, no matter how hard you deny them.

"Narcissa...requires a little explaining, I think," I said.

She looked at me sharply.

"Kingsley is going to be interim Ministry for an emergency period. One year and one day from today will be elections. Until then we're under martial law."

"Expected, of course, what with the corruption in the Ministry and Wizengamot," she said. Her voice was a rasp but she forced it into a calm that was impressive as hell. We might have just as well been discussing the weather.

"He's put me in charge of the Auror office," I said. "I cut a deal with the Malfoy's during the battle. I'm not going to prosecute them for any actions taken as Death Eaters. I'm not talking about them using an Imperius defense, I mean not prosecuting at all. They don't know it yet but the second part is that they're going to have to come clean, totally. If I catch one illegal act, one restricted item. One hint of corruption or extortion or blackmail. I will come down on them like a thunderbolt from Zeus, I am not kidding. I will raze Malfoy Manor to the ground, water the ground with their blood, and plow salt into their fields.

"Since there won't be a Wizengamot for a year, and the courts are going to be tribunals, I have a whole year to politically castrate them. By the time I'm done, assuming they keep on the straight and narrow, they'll be lucky to keep their fortune."

"Very well," she said, rising to her feet. "Thank you, Harry Potter."

"Not a problem at all," I said.

"I can only imagine the work you have ahead of you," she paused. "Just remember, Teddy does have a grandmother."

"We'll remember that," I said, then pulled my head out of the fireplace.

I turned to the couch. I was too exhausted for the nightmares.

## Chapter 2: One Tin Soldier

Go ahead and hate your neighbor,  
Go ahead and cheat a friend.  
Do it in the name of Heaven,  
You can justify it in the end.  
There won't be any trumpets blowing  
Come the judgment day,  
On the bloody morning after...  
One tin soldier rides away.

-Coven-

Winky woke me promptly at eight.

A half-second later she popped out of the way of the curse I'd instinctively sent her way.

"Sorry," I said immediately.

"Master doesn't need to apologize," Winky said, wringing her ears.

Master...did I ever mention that I hate being called that? I shook my head. "Yes, I do," I said. "You were just doing as I asked, Winky. You didn't deserve to have a curse flung at you. I've been living on the run from Voldemort and—oh for the love of Merlin stop that. The man is dead, Winky. He's never going to harm anyone ever again."

Winky froze, one ear twisted in her hand.

"You, er, can let your ear go?" I tried.

She did.

I suddenly understood why Hermione would pinch the bridge of her nose when Ron and I were being particularly frustrating. I managed the urge to do the same. "Look, Winky, I've just spent most of the last year camping in a little tent, constantly on the alert that one of His goon squads was going to drop in on me. Try not to startle me." I thought for a moment, "You, uh, should probably stand well back and call out to me rather than shake me awake."

"Winky will be doing that, Master Harry Potter Sir."



Back to four names, damn. At least it was better than having a sycophant drool 'yes, Master' all the time.

"Yous and Missus Auror's food will be up shortly."

"Thank you," I said, wondering how Tonks was going to take her new name. "Could you go into Professor Snape's stores and get out a dose of hangover potion? Er, hangover relief potion?" The man's stores were all carefully labeled and dated, with a mania that was definitely obsessive and probably compulsive. The fact that his students knew that meant that it'd be just like him to leave a poison that caused hangovers to be labeled 'hangover potion' in case someone tried to nick some.

"Put it by Tonks' food," I added.

"Yes, Master Harry Potter Sir, Winky is be doing that right away."

Despite not having nightmares, I didn't feel rested. My bones ached, my muscles had the consistency of perfectly cooked spaghetti, my eyes felt like the Sandman had dumped powdered glass in them and the lids felt gummed together and thick, and my mouth tasted like Wormtail had shifted into his rat form, curled up in it, died, and had started to rot.

I floo-called Andromeda again, she didn't seem to be the partying type either and if nothing else I could write a note and leave it. To my surprise she was already up and dressed and looking better than...well, certainly than I did, better than she'd looked last night at any rate.

"I thought you'd be calling again," she said.

How do you respond to that? There was a part of me that wanted to be sad. To curl up and mope and have nightmares that woke me up screaming and all the other things I'd done when Sirius died. Instead I felt numb. There was this horrible nothingness where all of my feelings had been, but at least that numb-feeling left me able to function.

"Can you handle funeral arraignments for Remus?" I asked. "Tonks will probably want a hand, but we need to move before the Death

Eaters and scum that got away can start destroying evidence and fleeing the country and whatever."

Andromeda nodded and started to say more but I'd gotten what I wanted and pulled my head out. Contact the Weasleys? Numb was good, useful, but I wasn't sure it could stand up to that, not yet.

Coward.

I pushed open the door of the guest room. "Hey Tonks, wakey, wakey," I said. A gesture at the globes made them start glowing.

A pained groan from the bed and the covers jerked up to cover the pillow. At least she didn't curse me. But then, I had packed her wand into the top drawer of the bed-side cabinet the night before rather than let her sleep with it under the pillow the way I had. I walked over to the bed and jerked all the covers off.

Tonks hair was stringy and an unappealing shade of pea soup green. Given that her hair had reverted to what I assumed was its natural color after Sirius' death it was probably more indicative of how she felt physically than what the loss of Remus had done to her.

"Potter," she wheezed and glared up at me while squinting against the light and wincing in pain.

"Tonks," I returned. "You look awful."

"I feel..." her skin went green.

I helped her hobble to the bathroom and managed not to make any cracks about the Throne while holding her hair out of the way as she emptied her stomach.

"Where? How? Teddy—"

I stopped her by the simple method of not getting out of her way. "Teddy's fine," I said. "We're in the most heavily warded set of apartments in Hogwarts. Take a shower."

"I want to see my son," Tonks said.

"If you go in there looking and smelling the way you do, he'll have nightmares for a month," I said.

"As if you look any better than me," she snarled.

"I don't have green hair and skin and spend ten minutes praising the porcelain God." Oh well, I tried. "Don't make me make it an order, Tonks."

Her eyes were flat. That was just as disturbing as her hair. People's eyes shouldn't change. Dumbledore's should always twinkle, Severus' should always be cold, Voldemort's should always be angry, my eyes (I'm told) should always be green, and Tonks' eyes should never be flat, lifeless. (That three of the people on my list were dead was beside the point).

"You think you can give me orders?" she asked flatly.

"Shacklebolt put me in charge of the Aurors last night," I said. "Or this morning, whenever it was. So until I'm dead or he finds someone better, yes."

That seemed to jar her. "Shack's in charge of the DMLE then?"

"The Ministry," I said. "I'll explain over breakfast, after you shower."

Tonks glanced beyond me into the guest room and the living room beyond it. "Fine," she said. Then added petulantly. "I feel terrible."

"Given how much you drank, I'm not surprised. I'll have a hangover potion ready for you."

I closed the door behind me. I went to the office and checked on Teddy who was just starting to wake up. He clung stubbornly to the tail of the transfigured plush werewolf as I changed him, but swapped it in favor of the bottle I presented him. Maybe I was getting the hang of babies. Change, feed, put to bed, repeat as needed.

There was a flare of light from the living room and a voice asking 'hello?'

A familiar voice.

"Professor McGonagall," I said, recognizing the face in the fireplace.

She seemed surprised to see me. "Dare I ask how you got into Professor Snape's rooms? No one else seems to know how, including myself."

"I'm Harry Potter," I said dryly. "I can do anything."

Did her lips twitch? Was that a smile? From Professor McGonagall? I needed new glasses.

"Who is that?" she asked.

"Teddy Lupin, my Godson," I said.

"Can I come in?" she asked. "There are a few people that need to talk to you."

"Great," I said. "C'mon down."

Her head withdrew and the fire flared back into place. A moment later it turned green and she stepped out. Dean, Lee Jordan, a wizard, and two witches I didn't know came through.

"Dean, Lee, didn't see you at the party last night," I said. "How did you manage to luck out?"

The two in question smirked at me. Traitors.

"Professor, Headmistress now, I presume, it's good to see you again," I continued.

"And you, Mr. Potter. Congratulations, it seems like you didn't need potions after all."

"Yeah, well," I shrugged.

She looked at the plush werewolf that Teddy had. "That's a remarkably fine piece of transfiguration, Mr. Potter. I doubt I could have done better. The fur pattern, is it..."

"Yes," I said softly as Teddy gummed the tuft of the toy's tail. "I imagine dad and Sirius are having a grand old time teasing him about it."

"Indeed," she said.

"So. What's been happening?" I asked.

The older witch (not older than McGonagall, but older than anyone else present) said. "I'm Constance Hammers."

There were too many cracks to make with a name like that, but she continued before I could decide which one.

"I'm your new boss."

"Joy," I said.

"We're operating under martial law," she continued. "That means—"

"The law is whatever we say it is," I said.

"Not quite."

"Too bad. Tell Shack I fully intend to wipe out the Death Eaters from the community, the corruption from the ministry, the bigots from the wizengamot, the power from the old families, and the stupidity from society." I paused. "On second thought I might get Hermione to deal with that last one."

Dean and Lee snickered. McGonagall's lips thinned, and twitched upward, but stopped just short of breaking the horizontal. Not quite a smile but close.

"You can't do that," one of the wizards said.

"Watch me," I said. "Shacklebolt gave me a job I don't want. He's going to have to live with that...unless he finds someone better or something kills me first. Is there anything else?"

Lee nodded. He looked really tired. I wondered when he got up, or if he even bothered going to sleep. "We've got a couple of the first

level dungeons set up as a temporary morgue. Anti-decay spells and the like. The grounds will be cleared up shortly."

"I though Kingsley wanted a documentation team to go through first?" I said.

"That's, uh, my job," the wizard said. "I'm Henry Livingstone, no relation."

I wonder how many people asked that he introduced himself that way.

"This is one of my assistants, Virginia Snoddy," he continued.

Dean flinched before she introduced herself.

"Ginny, please."

Oh, hey, I do have feelings after all. That one felt like someone shoved a pike in my gut and twisted.

"Ms. Snoddy," I said. It came out colder than I intended. Oops.

She flinched. "Did I do something wrong?"

"I tried to explain," Dean said.

"Ginny Weasley was my girlfriend," I told her. "We agreed not to get engaged until after... As you can see, that didn't happen."

"I'm sorry for your loss," she said awkwardly.

"So am I. Why are you two here?"

"Oh, sorry," Henry said. "We're MIB."

And now we know where muggle conspiracy theories come from. I wonder what the Yank Ministry, or whatever they call it, has going on at Area 51.

"Magical Investigation Bureau," he added when I didn't react.

"They're like magical crime-scene techs," Dean supplied.

Let's hear it for the muggle-born/raised/whatever. If something makes no sense relate it to a show on the telly.

"So everything has been documented?"

Snoddy nodded.

"Then why are you still here?"

Henry huffed. "My team, has been directly assigned to the Auror department for as long as martial law is in effect. Young Dean Thomas here has been helping us document the grounds and castle."

Grand, I thought.

"Grand," I said.

"I helped with sketches," Dean said. Made sense, he had as much artistic talent in his toenail as Draco did on a broom. Given that Draco Malfoy had once been scouted by the Junior England Team as a Chaser it said a lot about both of them. (That Draco chose to play Seeker as a way to get at me just showed how stupid he was).

"Lee?" I asked.

"I've been organizing cleanup," he offered.

"So everything is nicely documented. My Auror department has some magical investigators. And the bodies are being stowed in the dungeons. Did I miss anything?"

The four traded looks.

"We, er, didn't find You-Know—"

"Call him 'Voldemort'," I said, cutting off Henry.

The older wizard and witches flinched. Dean and Lee didn't.

More people to train. Lovely. Maybe I should just recruit the entire DA. Start over with some real talent.

"We didn't find his wand, Harry," Dean said.

I know. He hadn't brought his yew wand to that last fight. I'd had to go back for it. I had both, actually. I didn't want someone turning Voldemort's old wand into some kind of relic, and the Elder Wand was just too bloody dangerous to be left lying around. I also had Draco's hawthorne wand, but I had plans for it.

"I see," I said instead. "What else do you wish to tell me?" I asked.

"The dead Death Eaters," Hammers said, "present us with an opportunity. Applied tracking spells—"

"No," I said.

"Excuse me?"

"You want to use the bodies to track who buries them. Track them to their homes or hideouts, identify and track whoever claims the bodies, who attends the funerals, who those people interact with in turn," I said. "You can do it, I can't stop you, but you won't get any help from my department. Not to do the tracking, not to do any arresting."

"You work for me, Potter," she growled.

"Then you can fire me," I said. "The families will be allowed to claim their dead relatives. They will not be molested by me or my Aurors," I looked at Henry, "or our staff. We won't act on any intelligence you derive from doing so."

She scowled at me. "Fine, Potter. We won't try tracking the bodies."

"I'll have a friend checking just to make sure," I promised her. "Is there anything else?"

Hammers and Professor McGonagall traded uneasy looks.

Hammers sighed angrily.

"We were keeping a number of prisoners here, in Hogwarts," she said.



"Heavily secured towers and dungeons, broken up by as much space as practical and behind the heaviest wards we could throw up," I said. "I know. I had a couple of friends who helped on the warding. Lee was one of them, but not the only one."

"The decision was made to transfer them in groups to Azkaban," Hammers said.

"And it got screwed up?"

"You knew?"

Azkaban is the 'most secure' prison in the world—or so everyone says. People are sheep, and are about just as bright. It has something to do with herd mentality and how the intelligence of a group is inversely proportional to the number of people in it. Hermione tried to explain it once when we were bored. I ignored most of it.

The truth of the matter is that Azkaban is only slightly less leaky than the colander I had to use at the Dursleys. Most of Azkaban's reputation came from the dementors. Given the number of times they've tried to kill me I'm not what you'd consider a fan.

"I haven't heard one good thing about Azkaban, ever," I said. "Most escape proof prison my arse. I'm getting rid of the dementors. It's not at the top of my list but it's damn near it."

"The Dementors are—"

"Worse than useless as guards. They couldn't see an escaping prisoner in broad daylight," I said. "We're the only country in the world that still uses them. How do you think we're going to look if we just start dumping people into their presence? Under Martial Law, if I remember correctly, we don't even need to put them before a show trial to do it."

Damn right I remembered correctly. That was how they put Sirius and a couple of others away. They didn't actually use the Martial Law provisions (much) because Voldemort hadn't as infiltrated as thoroughly as he did this time. They hadn't needed them, except in

special cases where it was easier to just throw people in prison and forget about them. Or to suddenly change trial times, bring them before a full wizengamot, and deny them a defense advocate as they had in my case. Even Fudge hadn't been a big enough fool to try and have Dumbledore removed.

Unfortunately, as much as the Ministry (and especially the law enforcement department) needed to change, there were more important things.

"Forget it, what happened?"

"We found a transport team dead," Hammers said. "Twelve people. Their wands, IDs, and valuables were all taken."

"How many escaped?"

"Eight," she said, then hesitated.

"Who?"

"Antonin Dolohov, among others," she admitted. "The full file is on your desk."

"Great, now get out, all of you. Dean, Lee, stick around Hogwarts, will you? I'm going to need to talk to the DA, but later."

Dean nodded, "I'll make sure everyone knows. Usual spot?"

"I don't know how much is left of it," I said. "Besides, it's not like we're a secret anymore."

He nodded and they began to leave. McGonagall hesitated by the fireplace. "I admit, I am surprised to find you in these quarters. I—"

"I found out a few things about his motivations," I said shortly. "Why Dumbledore trusted him with his life...and with his death."

Her eyes widened slightly. "Did he..." she hesitated.

I'm not sure I knew what she wanted to ask. Hell, she probably didn't know herself. "He served as the Headmaster of Hogwarts as best he could, in the best traditions of the post and Slytherin House, in a

very difficult time," I said finally. I hesitated. "We very likely would not have won if it weren't for his actions."

"Can you tell them?"

"I will, but not now. Too many things to do."

She nodded. "Well. I suppose you're free to use his quarters then, until..." she shrugged.

"I plan to. At least until I can be sure of the security at the old Headquarters," I said.

She turned to Winky who was standing in one corner. Damn, I'd missed her entirely. If she'd been an assassin I'd be dead. "I release you of your oaths to Hogwarts in favor to Harry Potter."

Winky looked...perky. She swept a hand and the towel she'd been wearing toga-style shifted from Hogwarts' purple to green with gold trim. The Potter colors, if I remembered correctly.

"Thank you."

She nodded.

"Severus' body is in the Shrieking Shake. Can you see that it's retrieved with proper dignity?"

She nodded again. "Do you want to make arraignments?"

"I..." I shook my head. "You know what Kingsley dropped in my lap, and what Hammers just brought. I need to find what's left, what I have to work with, and if I don't get things moving people will be able to bury evidence so deep that we'll never find it."

"I understand," she said softly.

"Can you?"

"Certainly," she said. "I suppose the old cemetery is best."

"No," I said thinking of another place, "The cemetery in Godric's Hollow, next to my mother, opposite my father."

She rocked back on her heels in surprise. "Why there?"

I smiled, a small bitter smile. "I didn't have any friends before Hogwarts, he had one. I made true friends at Hogwarts, he lost the one he had...and we both loved people with red hair who went before their time."

"Li—" she closed her mouth abruptly, but I knew the question she'd stopped short of asking was my mother's name. Instead she said. "I look forward to hearing the full story," and ducked through the floo.

The shower turned off.

Tonks came out as Teddy let out a monster belch and his hair turned green. The same green I saw every time I looked in the mirror. Cleaning charms had removed the worst of the grime but left her robes still rumpled. Her hair was a dull, limp, and black. Otherwise she looked better.

"Hangover potion," she grunted.

"Food first," I said. "The label says not to take on an empty stomach."

Winky had set out pancakes and porridge and a bowl of fruit, along with milk and pumpkin juice. Tonks grabbed her bowl of porridge and began eating it sullenly.

"Kingsley put me in charge of the Aurors earlier this morning," I said.

"Congratulations, I'm taking emergency personal leave," she said.

"Leaves are canceled," I said. "Someone had the bright idea of moving prisoners last night. Eight Death Eaters escaped, in addition to whoever wasn't captured last night and is still out there."

"Bully them."

"Including Dolohov," I said.

She stopped eating abruptly, started at me for a moment, then turned and eyed the potion warily. I could see the debate in her mind.

Risk the nasty effects of a potion on an unfull stomach, or keep eating. She kept eating.

"What about..." she stopped.

"I floo-called your mother. She's seeing to arraignments for Remus."

"What about...have they recovered Dad's...body yet?"

"I honestly don't know," I said.

She spooned down the last of the porridge and gunned down the potion as I teased Teddy with the transfigured werewolf.

"I need you to listen to me for a moment and not say anything until I'm done," I said.

She nodded. A quiet Nymphadora Tonks. It was just as telling as the lack of color in her hair. Unfortunately for her I needed her too much to allow her to grieve. Fortunately the Dursleys had taught me a great way of keeping my mind off my problems. Keep myself as busy as possible.

"I promised Remus that if anything happened to the two of you I'd do everything I could to make sure that Ted didn't go through what I had to," I said. "I don't know how secure your place is right now. I do know that Headquarters is not secure."

"Where are we?"

"Severus Snape's quarters in Hogwarts," I said. "Long story. Suffice to say that anyone who tries to break in with hostile intent is going to be surprised by the wards. Lethally surprised."

She nodded at that. An accepting nod that was just a little too eager for someone to try just that than was really suitable for an Auror to show; but mostly just accepting something that she wasn't at all happy about, but didn't have the power to change.

"Winky, is in my service. If you need any help at all I expect you to ask. I don't care if you go to your mother instead of one of us, but you are not allowed to burn out on me, understood?"

"Yes, Sir," she said, a touch of anger in her voice. Good. An angry Tonks was better than an utterly depressed Tonks.

"Remus might have meant raising him, Tonks, but neither of us ever suspected I'd be where I am under the conditions I am," I continued. "Shacklebolt is Minister, but he's running a provisional ministry under Martial Law, with elections to be held a year and a day from when it was declared which was earlier today. I have two immediate goals. One is hunt down the immediate threats, the remaining Death Eaters and the like. The second is to clean up the Auror office. I don't know if it was infiltrated. I don't know if there were out-right collaborators, or people just took off running. But until the office is clean, I can't start my long-term plans."

"What are your long-term plans?" she asked neutrally.

"I'm going to purge the ministry of corruption. I'm going to dismantle the wizengamot and replace it with a legislature that actually answers to the people it governs, all the people, the goblins, and vampires, and werewolves, and centaurs, and merfolk, as well as the wizards and witches. I'm going to make sure that a separate and independent judiciary is created, with oversight to make certain that what happened to Sirius can't happen again. By the time I'm done the only things that'll be the same are the titles, and maybe not even then."

"Nobody will go for it."

"We're under Martial Law. Until elections the Law is whatever we—that is, the Ministry and specifically those that have to enforce the law—say it is. We're not going to give them a bleeding choice in the matter," I said grimly. "I need you to—"

"You need? You need? What about what I need?" Tonks snapped, her hair grew wild, long, and turned an angry crimson as she came out of her seat so fast it clattered to the floor behind her. "You drag me and my son off to some evil bastard's quarters without asking. You come in making plans and telling me all the things you've started, well bully for you!"

She was screaming now. Pure rage. If her wand wasn't still in her bedside cabinet I'd be frightened. As it was there was enough raw

power pouring off her that the hairs on the back of my neck were bristling.

"My husband is dead and you won't even let me bury him peace! You don't have a fucking clue what it feels like to lose—"

She froze. Very slowly her hand went up to her hair and she pulled a strand around so that she could see it. Just as slowly she sank back down and I was only just fast enough to magic her chair upright before she sat down on the floor.

Teddy's face turned red as he began wailing, and the color crept up and into his hair.

"Oh," Tonks said softly as her hair turn a dull mousy brown. "Oh Merlin, Harry, I...you didn't deserve that. I...you lost Ginny, didn't you?"

I nodded.

"It...it still doesn't seem real."

"No," I said softly and held my godson as he cried. "It doesn't."

I held the plush werewolf over him and he instantly quieted down and grabbed for the tail.

"You didn't have that already...did you?" she asked.

"Transfigured it, McGonagall was impressed," I said. I looked up at her, "I was planning on getting Remus a complete set, a stag, a black dog, and a werewolf, when Ted was born, but I never got a chance."

"It looks like him," she said softly. "He wanted me to see. I think he wanted to try and scare me off, show me the monster I was marrying. Did you mean for that to happen?"

I nodded.

"When did you...see him like that?"

"My third year," I said. "We'd just captured Pettigrew and found out about Sirius. We were coming back to the castle. He started to transform, and Wormtail transformed into a rat, and the dementors attacked, and it got kind of confusing for a while."

"He wouldn't let me watch," Tonks said.

"It...wasn't pleasant, and not because he hadn't drunk his potion that night," I said. "Listening to Hermione get tortured was harder, but not much." Mostly because she was my friend and a few special lessons aside I hardly new Remus when that happened.

Neither of us spoke for a while after that.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked finally.

"Go to the Ministry, find out how big a mess it is," I said. "We have to hunt down the Death Eaters and clean house, or at least get started on both, before we can think about any of the other problems. Kingsley's giving me Percy."

"Weasley?" she asked unhappily.

"Sic him on the paperwork," I said. "I've got a couple of other people I want as well. Is there some supply department where I can get them, or do I have to fill out paperwork?"

"Let me see your badge."

"My badge?" I asked.

She nodded. "Aurors of a certain rank can make temporary shields using their own. That way they can enlist people if they need a few extra bodies for a take down or if they need someone with special skills like a Cursebreaker."

I pulled out my badge in its wallet and slid it across the table to her.

She opened it and whistled. "Shack doesn't do things by halves, does he?"

"What do you mean?"



She turned to holder around. On one side was my brand-new Senior Auror shield. On the other was an ID card complete with a little three-dimensional figure of me hovering over one corner, instead of the picture that muggle IDs, or even most wizarding ones, used. Tonks pointed to a line. "Auror-Commander."

"Huh I thought I was a Senior Auror ," I said.

"As I said, Shack doesn't do things by halves."

"Not following, Tonks."

She shook her head. "There are only three shields. Provisional Auror, Auror, Senior Auror. It cuts down on the number of different shields, which helps make them easier to recognize for the civilians and cheaper for us, and three ranks are easier to banter around in the field than full rank-titles. Everyone above Auror-Sergeant gets a Senior shield. Aurors through Auror-Sergeants get Auror shields. People who have passed through the training but haven't completed their fieldwork assignment get Provisional Auror shields."

"And Auror-Commander is fairly high?" I asked.

"Remember, our manning and table of organization were written when it seemed like Grindelwald was going to invade and then we had to help deal with him when he didn't," she said. "Our levels went up again when He showed up, but Fudge drew our manning levels way down. Below what they were even before Grindelwald."

"So?" I asked.

"According to the TO each of the four region commands, which correspond roughly to England, Ireland, Wales, and Scotland, are led by an Auror-Commander. The Isle of Man falls under Ireland which isn't split like it is in the muggle world. Each Commander is supposed to have six Auror-Captains, one for each of four six-hour watches, plus two so that everyone has time off in a rotating basis."

I nodded.

"Each Watch has a number of Auror-Lieutenants, each leading a task force—border patrol, emergency tactical response, and so on. Each Task Force would have a number of Patrols led by Auror-

Sergeants or Auror-Corporals, and the number of patrols and their size would vary by job, situation, location.

"At the top of the organization, the Chief of Aurors, would hold the rank of Auror-General. But in addition to that there were staffs, for example each region had an Auror-Captain—actually called an Auror-Major to separate him from the 'working' captains—who served as the Auror-Commander's exec. Other admin and staffing personnel, of course, specialty personnel like Cursebreakers and Healers, some people on loan from the Magical Investigation Bureau for investigating crime scenes...all of whom were addressed as 'Auror' as a courtesy.

"Plus there were a bunch of independent Patrols and Task Forces. The Royals had their own security section led by an Auror-Captain, I believe, and Kingsley led a temporary one when he was put in charge of the search for Sirius."

"I take it that ranks are pretty much inflated?" I said. If pay was proportional to rank (I couldn't think of any good reason why it wouldn't be, but since the wizarding world often seemed to do things with an absence of good reasons I wouldn't be surprised if it wasn't the case) it'd make things difficult for me if I needed to strip a bunch of people of their rank. Especially since something like that tends to follow people around.

"No, actually," Tonks said. "Fudge wanted to keep ranks down because it was cheaper that way. Amelia and Rufus both wanted ranks kept down for their own reasons, and they would use it as a bargaining chip when they wanted or needed something else funded instead. I don't think Rufus was ever more than Auror-Lieutenant. I know Constance Hammers was made an Auror-Captain just before she transferred to LEPrecon and he took over. Kingsley was only an Auror-Sergeant, but he was brevetted to Auror-Lieutenant during the search for Sirius."

"Brevetted?"

"He was given the rank, but it was only a temporary 'acting' rank, and he only got the pay of an Auror-Sergeant."

And now he was the interim Minister of Magic.

"So unless you transferred to a different department, there wasn't a lot of opportunity for promotion?" I asked.

"Not really, why? Worried about someone trying for your job?" she asked. "Or is it about money."

"Money, mostly," I said. "I'm not worried about myself, the Potters were fairly well off, even with Mum and Dad and their friends living off their savings, and Sirius..." I stopped and gave a half-hearted shrug.

Tonks nodded morosely. "Yeah, I remember that. I was surprised at the reading of the Will. I didn't think he had that much gold."

"I, that is, we, got a lot of Dumbledore's notes after he died," I said. "After they locked Sirius away his mother changed her tune. Seemed to think he had been plotting since before starting school to get close to the blood-traitors and their ilk. Voldemort may have been defeated by an infant, but her son had clearly shown his heart was in the right place and gone to prison for it, and taken out a bunch of muggles and another one of those would-be 'heroes' in the process. Since Regulus was dead she passed the Black wealth onto him."

"Yeah, that'd sound about right, given what I know of her," Tonks agreed. "Though I'm surprised she didn't pass it off to Bellatrix or Narcissa."

"She didn't want Lucius getting his hands on the Black Library," I said. "She actually spelled that out in her Will, and with Bellatrix firmly in Azkaban and without issue, not that Sirius wasn't in the same position..."

"And she despised Mum for marrying a muggle-born," Tonks finished. "As for our pay, it isn't just a matter of rank. There are pay increases for time-in-grade which are fairly generous. There are also pay bonuses for things like hazardous duty, or serving at Azkaban as one of the wizard guards, or part of the broom patrol, and things like that. How much extra depends on the specific assignment or assignments, and they're paid by the month. And finally there are merit bonuses that you can get for helping to take down a particularly dangerous dark wizard, or destroy a particular dark artifact."

Tonks pushed her plate aside and considered the fruit-bowl. She probably had as little interest as I did in eating. I'd learned the hard way to eat when I had the chance, it was something that between Hogwarts' meals and Molly Weasley's cooking I'd forgotten. Almost a year on the run had reminded me of those lessons, and it seemed like Tonks had learned them too at some point...or maybe it was just the potion.

"I keep forgetting how much you don't know," she muttered. "Shacklebolt must have been out of his mind when he offered you the job."

"Do you think he's deliberately setting me up to fail?"

She looked up at me startled. "Never mind, I was talking to myself."

"My question remains," I said coolly. I was sick and tired of people keeping things from me. If she thought Kingsley was setting me up I wanted to know.

"No," she said. "I just, okay, I get hiring you as an Auror. We need numbers. But put you in charge? Okay, you can handle yourself in a fight, but do you know anything about tracking and stealth?"

"You were worst in your class?" I offered.

She smiled weakly and the tips of her hair turned pink for a moment before returning to brown. "Besides that?"

"I have an invisibility cloak, and practice with both the disillusionment charm, and the polyjuice potion."

"Bill and Fleur's wedding, I'd forgotten that."

"And second year."

Tonks looked at me askance, "You used polyjuice in your second year?"

"We thought Malfoy, Draco, knew something about the Chamber of Secrets and decided that infiltrating the Slytherin common room was the best way," I said defensively.

"And that worked?" she asked.

"If you mean, did we ask him and not get caught out? Then yes," I said. "If you mean, did he actually know something? Then no."

Tonks started to ask something else, but paused and frowned slightly. "Hermione?"

"She always was the most gifted witch in my year," I said. "She also found out why that potion is rated for human use only."

"What did she turn into?" she asked with a glimmer of a familiar gleam in her eyes.

"Cat," I said. It was good to see some of her usual humor leak through.

Teddy chose that moment to stop slobbering on the werewolf toy and look up at me before sneezing violently and turning his hair violet.

"He's getting good at that," Tonks said.

"I think his hair is functioning like a muggle mood-ring," I said. "You can pretty much tell how he's feeling by the color of his hair." I passed him to her and once he was settled in her arms his hair promptly turned a bubblegum pink. "See?"

She looked down at her son and smiled before looking back up at me. "I didn't say anything earlier but...thank you," she said softly, "For...well, everything."

"It wasn't any trouble, Tonks," I said. "As soon as I have a grasp on what's going on and things have settled down, take a few days off. Just..." I hesitated, how was I supposed to tell her that I wouldn't hold it against her (as much as I might want to) if she took off and did what I so desperately wanted to do. "If you happen across Dolohov, just promise me that you won't try to take him alone?"

She looked at me in surprise, then down at Teddy before back up at me. A glimmer of understanding passed through her eyes before she nodded. "I promise."

I wonder if she thought I made her promise because of Teddy, or because I wanted to tell Kingsley to go screw himself and take off after them by myself. In the end it didn't really matter.

I stood, "I need a shower. I'll go talk to Percy before coming in. I suppose since I'm talking over I need to make some kind of speech."

Tonks grimaced.

"My thoughts exactly. Don't bother having anyone come in if they're off doing something important and..." facing down a Dark Lord over a stupid stone, or going off to chase Horcruxes suddenly sounded really appealing.

"Shit," I sighed. "Tonks, I don't have a fucking clue as to what I'm supposed to be doing. I mean, okay, sure, I faced down Voldemort more times than anyone else alive or dead. But how does that translate to having to run a whole office filled with people whose job is to do just that?"

"Well," she said standing up. "I suppose you're just going to have to learn. I suggest doing it quickly."

"Thanks," I muttered.

"It wasn't any trouble," she parroted back at me. "I'll, uh, drop Teddy off at my mum's."

"Okay," I said as I stood. "Just remember, if you need any help, ask." So far I had avoided Severus' personal rooms, his store room, library, personal lab, and bedroom, but I knew the loo off the small kitchen didn't have a shower which meant the one in the guest room, or the one in Severus' room. Some choice.

"Harry?" Tonks asked as I reached for the doorknob of Severus' room.

"Yeah?"

"Our last safe-house was compromised just before the, er, battle," Tonks said. "Would you mind terribly if..." she gestured at the guest room. "It'll only be until I can get my own place again."

"Sure, not a problem," I said. "The portrait outside is in the first-level dungeons, and is of a woman with red hair holding a python. The password is 'Lilium'. The floo is restricted to calls and the school's internal floo-network. To the best of my knowledge the only floo-travel-enabled fireplace in the school is in the Headmaster's office."

There was a small nook between two bookcases where a niche was carved into the wall. A crystal vase sat in it, inside of which was a fire lily. *Lilium bulbiferum* had been covered in both herbology and divination as a non-magical plant, with some magical properties—sort of like how a four-leaf clover is a non-magical plant, but brings inordinate good luck to whoever finds one (though not on the scale of *Felix Felicis*). I wondered if Mum knew it was a death symbol before it was her favorite flower.

That thought made me pause. I knew Severus was a paranoid recluse (though not on the scale of Moody) which is how I knew how heavily warded his rooms were. But even if I did know where his rooms were, I shouldn't have known the password or that this lily—

"Harry?"

"Sorry, had a thought," I said, and it wasn't entirely a lie. I'd obviously picked up some things from Severus' memories that I didn't recall actually seeing. So far nothing bad had happened, but the wards should have fried me to a crisp the moment I stepped in. Either he'd added me to his wards before his death, or...

I frowned, there was an 'or' there, but 'or what', was the question. I shook my head, it wasn't important now.

"Come over here," I said.

"Fire lily," Tonks said eyeing the flower. It had been encased in pure diamond, I wasn't entirely sure how except that it involved a couple of potions, but it had. "We keep an eye out for death symbols," she added.

And she had been mentored by no less than Alastor 'Mad-Eye' Moody. There was a five-inch moving picture of him next to the entry for 'Paranoia' in the dictionary.

"It was my Mum's favorite flower," I said. "It's also the anchor for the wards to these rooms." I pulled a collapsible knife out of my pocket. Spending a year camping had taught me how incredibly useful a couple inches of plain, unenchanted, sharpened steel could be.

"You have to prick a finger and donate a little blood," I said.

"Blood recognition," Tonks said, "sensitive wards." She frowned, "When did you get added?"

I shrugged, "Before he died, I guess."

"I thought he hated you."

"'Hate' doesn't begin to do his feelings justice," I said. "To Severus I was the living proof of every mistake he made from the time he first entered Hogwarts as a student to the time he first entered as a professor."

"Every mistake?" she asked.

As good as it was to hear some of the familiar curiosity in her voice I really didn't want to talk about it yet. "I'll need to tell the story sometime, he deserves that much," I said, "but I'm not ready to do it yet."

She nodded and took the knife. A prick on the finger, some blood smeared across a diamond-covered leaf, and it was done. I felt the wards welcome her, then welcome Teddy, and the blood disappeared.

"They jumped to Teddy as well," Tonks said. "Do you think, would he have, er, added your mother to them?"

Mum and Severus had long parted ways by the time he was accepted here as a teacher. In fact, I was pretty sure that she was dead first, though it was possible that he may have started two months before that Halloween night. "He might have," I said, then added softly, "he probably had more reason to add her than me."

Tonks and Teddy were long gone by the time I'd gotten out of the shower. Winky had gotten my best fitting Hogwarts robe, laundered



it, and had it hanging on the door of the bathroom when I was done. It wasn't until I was trying, and failing, to get my hair to lay neatly when I noticed that the badges that had marked me as a member of Gryffindor house and Quidditch team captain had been removed, leaving the robes feeling incomplete.

Story of my bloody (both figuratively and literally) life.

I tucked my wand and badge away and made a mental note to get new toiletries and more clothes. Preferably something that fits in colors other than black. No, I'd at least one more thing in black, a formal dress robe. And at some point I was going to have to go through Severus' things—Merlin knows I'm the closest thing he has to a family that's left (and wouldn't Sirius die of laughter if he ever heard me say that?)—but not today.

A hundred and one things to do before I could go to the Ministry. I didn't even want to have to go to the Ministry. I should have told Shacklebolt to go find someone else's life to screw up. Unfortunately I hadn't and he deserved to be told to find someone else in person. Hell, Tonks deserved to be told I'd had second thoughts in person...right after I granted her request for leave.

But I couldn't go right to the Ministry either, now could I? I had another stop to make. I didn't want to make it. Making it meant facing the closest thing to a family I had. It meant having to think about...her. I wasn't ready to do that. Sirius' death had been like a bludgeoning curse to the gut and even yard work hadn't been enough to keep the nightmares away. Gi—her death was going to be worse, and I didn't want to go through it again.

Yes, I was avoiding the issue. Call me a coward, but I was.

Instead I went to the dungeons.

Hogwarts' dungeons don't deserve the name. I've been in dungeons, real dungeons. Dark, and dank, and cold, with stone floors that sap the warmth from your body and stone walls that echo the pain and misery that's happened in their chambers long after those imprisoned are dead. Hogwarts' dungeons (as little as they deserve the name, I don't have a better one) are warm, well-lit, and I highly doubt that any torturing other than the schoolyard bully kind has ever happened in them. Not until last year at any rate, but according

to the DA most of the torturing went on in the (Defense Against the) Dark Arts classroom.

The Slytherin common room was hidden behind a blank wall in one of the first floor dungeons (if you suffer from insomnia and don't mind the décor all three levels of Hogwarts' dungeons are custom-made for your wandering delight). I didn't know the password, and I doubt it'd open if I asked. I wasn't about to sit back and toss passwords at it until one worked. But then, I didn't need to.

One of the stones was cracked. Not uncommon, exactly, but if you looked at it just right...

"Open."

The door ground open.

Slytherin was sparsely occupied with people that didn't have other places to go. (Most of the snakes opted out of the fight or joined Voldemort. Couldn't say I blamed them, it wasn't like the rest of us ever made them feel particularly welcome).

"Malfoy?" I asked.

A couple of people gestured to one side.

I could see where the halls led to the dormitories, one for boys, the other for girls. It was a dark, wet (we were under the lake as one large window showed) mirror of Gryffindor Tower. Better view of the lake, worse view of the Quidditch Pitch. Probably was pretty nice when it got hot but I wouldn't open the windows hoping for a breeze.

I walked over to where they had pointed. A picture of someone (a witch) in Slytherin green hung on the wall giving the common room a vaguely disapproving look. I looked and found a small grass snake hiding in one corner of the painting.

"Open."

The painting swung wide.

I was sensing a theme going on. It'd be just like what little I knew of Salazar Slytherin for him to have his own set of private passages

that led throughout the entire school all guarded by little snakes that only he and his heirs (and one Gryffindor) could use. Too bad I hadn't found out about this earlier.

I climbed up the stairs that led to the Slytherin head-students common room. It was unusual for both heads to come from the same house (as my parents had), but it'd happened so each House had a common room that was shared by a pair of dormitories for the head boy and girl, with corridors leading to different areas so that members of all the Houses could reach them. The internal geometry was confusing, but then Hogwarts had never been particularly sane in that regard and one was better off ignoring minor inconsistencies like that. It looked like Draco and his parents had claimed the entire Slytherin suite.

The three Malfoys were clustered together in chairs near the fire. All three looked up when I walked in, and none of the three looked like they expected to see me.

"Potter," Narcissa said coolly.

"How'd you get up here, past the password and wards?" Draco asked.

"I'm Harry Potter," I said blankly.

Draco smiled a tight little smile. "Nice try."

I smirked. Not exactly a skill I've had a lot of practice with, but after six years of his sneers and smirks I should be an expert. "Do you remember our second year?"

Draco frowned, then snorted. "You aren't the bloody Heir of Slytherin, Potter. Even I knew that when I started that crack."

"Yeah, well," I smirked. "You know all those little snakes that are hiding in pictures and carvings all around the school?"

Draco stopped. Total stillness. Very creepy if I hadn't seen someone creepier.

"That sink in Myrtle's bathroom, the one you were...sitting on when you were talking to her?" I pressed. I could have been more

accurate about where he was and what he was doing, but I wanted, needed his help. Humiliating him in front of his parents wouldn't help me get that. "If you noticed there was a little brass serpent on the cold water knob, on a sink that has never worked."

"What are you getting at, Potter?" Lucius demanded, standing up.

"I'm a parselmouth," I said. "I speak the words, and the path appears. Whether it's up here...or down in the Chamber of Secrets."

Lucius paled slightly.

"Why are you here, Potter?" Draco asked.

"Two reasons," I told him, then turned to Lucius. "Your wife and I made a deal. You and Draco get a walk for being Death Eaters. If you want, I'll let it stand at that. If you give me your word, no twisting words, no trying to double your way out of it, that you'll give your full and complete cooperation in hunting down and prosecuting your old friends, I'll give you my word that you'll never be charged for your past crimes."

"And if I decline?" he asked.

"Then when my investigations start I'll make sure that you won't be charged with being a Death Eater, supporting Voldemort, and the like," I said. "I'm sure there are enough other charges waiting. Aiding and abetting fugitives from the law, torture, murder, conspiracy, treason..."

"Treason?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"You did help lead a coup against Her Majesty's Government," I said. "Even if I'm willing to be generous and not charge you with anything since Voldemort's rebirth there is still the issue of the little riot you started at the World Cup, not to mention attempted murder and dealing in Forbidden objects."

He chuckled, "Even I recognize that there are practical limits on the Dark Arts, Mister Potter. There is little useful to be found in those which are Forbidden."

I smiled, "You know, I wondered if you knew or not."

He faltered. "Knew what?"

"Knew what the diary of Tom Riddle's really was."

"Tom Riddle?" Draco asked.

I draw a wand, my wand, and his eyes went wide. I didn't blame him, he thought the wand was snapped. I drew Voldemort's real name in the air in the same burning letters a figment of him had once used. "Tom Marvolo Riddle, Son of Merope Gaunt, daughter of Marvolo Gaunt. Merope fell in love with a muggle named Tom Riddle, obsessed about him really, ensnared him with a love potion, and was kicked out of her family for it. When she became pregnant she stopped supply love potions and he abandoned her.

"She lived just long enough to give him up to an orphanage and give him a name. Tom for his father, Marvolo for hers." I swished my wand through the letters and they rearranged. "I am Lord Voldemort, an anagram of Tom Marvolo Riddle."

Lucius' eyes were wide.

"You didn't know that either."

"Stop being secretive, Potter, you aren't good at it," Draco said.

"You know a lot about the Dark Arts, Draco," I said with a smirk. "Your mother and Aunts had access to the Black library which has one of the most extensive collections of works on the subject in Europe, if not the world. I would be sorely disappointed if the Malfoy collection was not as good; and you studied under Severus Snape who knew more about the Dark Arts than most of the people who bore the same mark you do, and that's saying something.

"Have you ever heard of something called a Horcrux?"

Narcissa made a shocked noise, sort of like a dying bird cutoff in mid-cry. Lucius' skin turned an unhealthy pasty color, sort of like undercooked porridge. He groped around behind him for his chair and sunk heavily into it. Even when he'd begged his master's forgiveness, or pleaded for Draco's continued well-being he

maintained an aristocratic flair. Now it was crumbling into a sickly silence.

Draco frowned. "No," he said. "But it seems as though my parents have."

"It's a way of surviving past death," I said. "You have to split your soul, you see, and put it into an object. It isn't really effective. Even if you die it traps you as less of a ghost."

"But the Dark Lord found a way to make it work," Draco said. "He can't have been the first one."

"It isn't so simple to split your soul, Draco," Lucius said. "Cold-blooded murder, not an act of rage or passion, or defense, or even attack, is the easiest. You have to...destroy something pure, without any more cause than that you can."

"Makes sense to go for babies then," Draco said.

I shook my head. "Not physical purity, emotional purity," I said. "Or maybe innocence would be a better word."

Lucius nodded slightly, "Precisely." He turned back to Draco, "Even that will only...tear the soul. Once that is done it is necessary to rip a portion off and emplace it in the vessel that is meant to hold it."

"And if something happens to the object with your soul in it. Your anchor in this world goes bye-bye," I finished.

"Not if you hide it well enough," Draco argued. "Give it to someone you trust."

I smirked. "That's what he did." I looked at Lucius. "Twice, in fact, though he didn't tell either of them what it was he entrusted to their protection."

"I don't—" Lucius stopped. "The journal." It came out in a flat hiss.

"Possessing a Horcrux is grounds for a date with a dementor," I said. "No appeal. That little prank you pulled, slipping Ginny Weasley that diary, got her possessed. It nearly killed her, myself, a half-dozen other students, and brought Voldemort back."

"You're wrong," Draco snapped suddenly. "If it was one of these Horcrux things the Dark Lord would never have been able to come back when it was destroyed."

"Finish the thought, Draco," I said.

He glared at me.

I rolled my eyes. "Despite what you like people to think, Draco, when you aren't being a git, buying your way into the Seeker position on your House team, playing the pureblood prince of Slytherin, muttering about what's going to happen when 'father hears about this', or being an insufferable prat, you actually are fairly smart."

"I did not buy—"

"Your father bought then, or bribed, more accurately," I said.

Draco nodded, "Just so that we're all saying things like they are."

"So. 'If it was one of the Horcrux things...'" I prodded.

"It either wasn't a Horcrux at all, or he'd done something else so that he still lived...spirited, whatever," Draco said. "Or...he had more than one."

"Bravo, Mr. Malfoy," I said. "Ten points to Slytherin."

"How," Lucius was looking practically green. "How many?"

"Did he intend to make?" I asked.

"Seven pieces then, including the one inside himself. A magically powerful number," Lucius said.

I shrugged. "Your call, Mr. Malfoy."

"It seems as though I have little choice," Lucius said. "How do I know that you are capable of amnestying me for my past?"

"You don't," I smirked. "You have my word and have to be content with that."

He looked ready to reject the terms but Narcissa put a hand on his arm. For a moment the muscles in his jaw worked, and he was probably going to need to see a Healer to replace the enamel his was wearing away (one did not spend seven years with Hermione Granger without learning more about dentistry and oral hygiene than any sane person wanted to know), but he nodded curtly.

"One more thing," I said. "You have a clean slate as of right now, provided you uphold your end of things. You do not want me to ever have cause to suspect you of committing a crime again. Understood?"

"Clearly."

"Good." I turned to Draco. "Now my second point of business. Draco, let's go for a little walk."

Draco looked at his parents, then stood and followed after me.

We left the Slytherin Common room and I started leading him aimlessly down wandering corridors. Draco wasn't my enemy. As much as I'd hated him before he never really amounted to more than an annoyance until sixth year, well, maybe fifth year. I still didn't like him, but I hoped I could work with him. I needed him. How sad was that?

"Where are we going, Potter?"

I paused. The course I was taking looked aimless, random, but really it'd be designed to thwart Prefect patrols. I never had told Hermione and Ron how badly I'd been sleeping in fifth and sixth year. It was so bad that sometimes, okay, a lot of the time, I hadn't even pretended to sleep.

Draco did not look at all happy to be back up here. I didn't blame him. I just walked over to the edge and sat in one of the hollows made by the battlements and let one leg hang over the edge.

"If you die what's to stop Shacklebolt from throwing Father and Mother in Azkaban?"



"Nothing," I said. "Which is one the reasons why I trust you not to curse me in the back. The least of them, actually."

"Oh yeah? Tell me another."

"Well, for one thing I'm Harry Potter. I've survived the killing curse, is a little fall going to stop me? Or is there enough time for me to cast a feather-light charm or a cushioning charm and save myself? Or will I twist in mid-air and cast a curse that'll bring down the Astronomy Tower with you in it?" I said.

Draco didn't reply.

I didn't want to speak first. Let him come to me.

Screw it, silence means time to think. Time to think means thinking about...

"You should have known better," I said. "The Nimbus 2001 was a lousy broom for a Seeker. It has an edge on the 2000 in acceleration, but it's even in top speed and it just isn't maneuverable enough. It's a great broom for a Chaser, or maybe a Beater who wants more speed instead of a more stable platform, but not a Seeker."

Draco sighed, "I did try to tell him. It was that advert about Ireland going to an all-Firebolt lineup."

"Advertising," I snorted. "The Firebolt is over-powered for a Keeper's broom and not really a stable enough platform to make a really great Beater's broom. It's why I'll never play professional. Too many years on an overly-fast broom compared to the people I was playing. I got too comfortable to letting the broom carry the game."

"Too many years as a Seeker on my part," Draco said. "I wanted to beat you so bad for the way you spurned me in the train before first year."

"The Hat wanted to put me in Slytherin."

"You?" Draco asked surprised.

"I was raised Muggle," I said. "My relatives, well, suffice to say that they could be held up as prime examples of everything Voldemort believed about them."

"Must you say that name?"

I ignored him. "You managed to insult the man who brought me away from them, and the first friend I ever had."

"Why did you even go to them? I mean, a wizard with your name...people would have had a fit if they'd found out where Dumbledore had stashed you."

"I had a lot of his notes and a lot of time to read them over the last year," I said. "There were blood wards. Voldemort had given my Mum a chance to stand aside—" as a chance to reward Snape "—and she refused so he killed her. That was a powerful piece of old magic—" right out of C.S. Lewis' magic from 'before the dawn of time' (I never was able to come up with an explanation for some of the books on Dudley's shelf considering the Dursleys' disdain for anything not 'normal') "—that caused the killing curse to bounce and, well..." I shrugged. "Voldemort himself couldn't touch me behind them, much less one of his followers."

Draco was silent for a moment. "Why did you let yourself get cursed like that?"

"I'm not sure if you were aware, but there was a prophecy in play," not exactly a big secret any more. "Voldemort got the first part, the one that told of who could defeat him. The choices were me or Neville. Odd that he thought the halfblood was a greater threat than the pureblood, don't you think?"

"Longbottom?" he snorted.

"He didn't get the rest of it though," I continued. "...and he shall mark him as his equal." I twisted to look at Draco and pushed my hair aside so that my damned scar was visible. "This little thing is a lot more than a mere facial disfiguration, Draco."

Draco went white. If he'd been any paler he'd be practically see-through.

"There's another part too, about how neither can live while the other survives. Old Magic, mostly because of Mum again. Only he could kill me, but, ironically, as long as I lived he couldn't die, even if all the Horcrux's were destroyed. Since I saw to that before he killed me he was nice and mortal again."

Draco's eyes narrowed. "Sooner or later someone was going to take another swing at him or get lucky. Even if they didn't, he's still die of old age, if nothing else, and Dark Arts are hard on the body."

"Exactly."

"That doesn't explain why we're up here."

"No, I don't suppose it does," I said.

I was willing to leave it at that for a while and watch the grounds below.

Draco wasn't.

"Why are we here, Potter."

"I think that you were just a little boy, talking the talk of the big, bad, Death-Eater-to-Be who suddenly found himself over his head when he got called on it and had to walk the walk. All that talk of getting rid of the mudbloods and blood traitors, of torturing and killing muggles sounded pretty neat, but the reality was something else. You found reality to be something that you didn't want a part in but didn't see a way out except to grope for any line that came your way—six years of classes together and you weren't sure if it was me or not, my arse."

Draco's cheeks turned pink. Embarrassment or anger, or both. Ron had the same reaction only his ears turned scarlet. I had to remember to mention that if they were ever in the same place together. Finding out they had something in common would probably give them both heart attacks.

"Don't be so surprised. You think you're the first person Voldemort pulled into his little band of sycophants who found that themselves in over their head?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said with a straight face and even tone.

"Dragon-shit," I said. "You liked playing the little Death Muncher, but when it came time to be the real deal you didn't have a clue. I don't know what you were thinking with the cursed opal necklace you got from Borgin and Burkes—" he started and I smirked at him. "You didn't think I knew where they came from?" I asked.

"No," he said stiffly.

"Summer before our second year you stopped there with your father to sell some things Lucius didn't want to be found in the possession of. That's when you saw the disappearing cabinet there, one of two you needed to get the Death Eaters into Hogwarts. It's also where you found the necklace and the hand of glory you used."

For a moment, a split second so fast that if I hadn't been watching for it I'd have missed it, Draco looked as if he had stepped onto one of the many trick steps on Hogwarts' many staircases. Then it was gone once more, behind that polite, but utterly blank mask that made him look like a miniature version of his father.

"And the mead...Draco, you had to know what Slughorn is like. You had to know that Christmas or not the chances of him giving it to Dumbledore were slim. Yet you went ahead and did it anyway."

"The Dark Lord's orders were precise. Find a way for the Death Eaters to enter the school, and kill Dumbledore. I tried that twice—"

"Three times," I said. This time a spark of fear appeared in his eyes and stayed there. "Only you couldn't do that either, could you? Disarm him, yes. Kill a man without a wand? No."

"Severus?" he asked. "Did he tell—"

"No," I said, "but he did it for you. Dumbledore always said that he trusted him with his life...he trusted him with his death too. Lucky you Voldemort always equated 'defeat' with 'kill' or he'd have killed you instead."

"I don't understand," he said.

The admission had to cost him. It couldn't not have, even if he didn't let it show.

"I know," I said. "Maybe you will, in time."

Draco bristled. Two years ago, hell, six months ago, he'd have probably taken a swing since he didn't have his wand. Instead he simply crossed his arms and waited. "Why did you bring me up here? You obviously know what happened."

"I brought you up here because both Albus Dumbledore and Severus Snape thought that there was something in you that was worth saving," I said. "Personally I don't see it, but I'm willing to give you a chance to prove them right."

Draco crossed his arms and sneered, "You could have just given me the same ultimatum you gave Father and spared me the drama."

"True," I said. "If I was going to do so." This time he didn't try to hide the surprise on his face. "And you will do so, or else, so consider it given. However, you have a choice."

"A choice?"

Oooh, I'd gotten him to parrot back what I'd said. Very nice. "A choice. You can leave it at that, or..."

"Or?" he parroted curiously.

Ah, there was the Draco I knew and loathed. Offer him a puzzle and he would be annoying as hell until he thought he knew the answer, at which point he'd come to gloat.

I stood up and flipped him a small leather folder. "I have a job offer for you."

Draco looked at the leather folder for a moment, then opened it. "An Auror shield?"

"Look again."

"Provisional Auror, big bloody difference," he shrugged. "They picked a funny person to make the pitch. Probably hope I'd refuse."

"Kingsley Shacklebolt made me Chief of Aurors," I said.

"You?" he asked with wide eyes.

"Me," I said.

His eyes narrowed and he sneered his customary sneer, but it was a habitual action, not malicious. "You know he's using you as a figure head."

"The thought occurred to me," I lied. Despite what people think I am capable of lying when I really, really had to. "Frankly it doesn't matter why he did it. He did, and there's no way unless I bugger things up that he's going to remove me. The Prophet would have a field day with him if he tried."

He nodded. "A point. Why me? And don't tell me it's all because of Dumbledore and Uncle Severus."

Uncle? Probably just because Severus was friends with the elder Malfoy—if it could be called that. "Because most wizards and witches lack common sense and logic the same way muggles lack magic," I said. "You, on the other hand, take something Montague said, couple it with a cabinet at a store in Knockturn alley, and come up with a way of sneaking Death Eaters into the school."

"I won't be your sycophant."

I rolled my eyes. How someone could be so observant one moment and blind the next I'm sure I'll never know. It was like someone had distilled the worst aspects of Ron and Hermione. "I don't want minions, Draco, I want you to do the bloody job. I'd like it if you toned down the git, but that might be expecting too much from you."

Draco snorted. "And yet you give me a shield you can take away with a word."

"The shield is provisional, for now, yes," I said. "Check the folio, the ID clearly says your rank is Auror, not Provisional Auror. I strongly suggest you get a new ID made, the old one still has you in your Death Eater robes."

To my surprise he simply nodded and put the folder away. "I suppose you don't want me to tell Father and Mother."

"It's your life, Draco," I said. "As long as you do the job and play by the rules I don't really care."

For a moment he stared at me as though he didn't know what to do, finally he shrugged. "Thank you, Potter."

I'm not sure which of us was more surprised at the words. He recovered first and turned and headed for the door.

"Draco?"

He stopped.

"There is one more thing," I said.

He turned back to me and I held out a wand. His wand. The wand he had used to best Dumbledore, and I had used to defeat Voldemort.

"My wand?" he asked. "It's yours by right of conquest," he said uncertainly.

"You need a wand, this one fits you," I said, then added snidely: "I am allowed to return it, aren't I?"

"Yes, but..." he shook his head. "Merlin, you really don't know what you're saying by doing this, do you?" he asked taking it.

"Nope," I said cheerfully.

The Burrow looked pretty much the way I remembered. Sections of the low garden walls looked cleaner and out of place, evidence of repair work rather than a partly-done cleaning exercise. The chickens still pecked in the dirt of their coop, but there were fewer of them than I remembered. The broom shed was to the left of the field the Weasleys' used for pickup games of Quidditch and family weddings, but I was sure it had been to the right of the field before. The house looked more dilapidated than I remembered, but there wasn't any obvious damage.

I felt the tingle of the perimeter ward as I walked up the path to the front door, but this was the closest place I'd ever come to having a family and home and it didn't try to stop me. It did, however, warn someone inside (or maybe someone had just been watching the path and alerted everyone) because Weasleys began to pour out of the house before I reached the porch.

We didn't say anything. They sort of clustered on the porch looking at me, and I stood on the path looking at them. My mouth went dry and my tongue felt thick, and I couldn't think of anything to say. I wanted to just turn around and walk away, but I couldn't do that anymore than I could not have come here.

"Hullo, Harry," George said.

I winced. The absence of Fred was a worse mutilation than the loss of his ear. They were the Twins. Together the two of them were the greatest pair of beaters Gryffindor had seen in years. Student and teacher had treaded cautiously lest their next footstep trigger one of the Twins' many pranks. They were like peas and carrots, peanut butter and jelly, Jekyll and Hyde... Seeing one without the other was so...so utterly wrong that there weren't words to describe it.

"Hey," I managed in reply.

The single word broke the spell that had kept them on the porch and me on the path and Molly came rushing down the front steps to wrap me up in one of her big hugs all while crying. I'd been worried that they were going to bring up Sirius, or more likely, her. Instead I found myself back in fifth year confronted by a crying Cho Chang.

Don't get me wrong, I didn't blame Cho for how she felt (though it made things awkward as hell) and for not handling Ced's death well. I mean, I didn't handle it well. I had nightmares, but they all centered on Voldemort being back. Cedric's part in them was...incidental. To me Cedric had been a friendly competitor, someone it was fun to play against but not an especially close friend. I don't think I really understood that until I lost Sirius, at which point I suddenly understood Cho as well. It was also when I realized that I was treating Cedric's loss like it was a secondary issue, that it didn't even matter compared to Voldemort.



I was wrong, of course. It mattered just as much as, and in some ways more than, Voldemort. I'd had more than one close encounter with Voldemort's mind. Not caring about a person, treating them like they're of a secondary importance, was the way he treated everyone, not just muggles and muggle-borns.

Besides, there is a shortage of friendly competitors in the world. It was a shame to lose one as fine as Cedric.

Hermione wedged her way between us and Molly turned and grabbed onto Arthur.

"Hey," Ron said, articulate as ever.

"Ron," I said as Hermione let me go.

"How are you?" Hermione asked gently.

"Fine," I said. I was too. Actually, I was following Severus' screwed up advice. Don't think about the emotional bullshit, just put it all away and focus on keeping the world from destroying itself. As long as I kept it all nice and distant I was good to go, let's here it for repressing how we feel.

"Harry," Hermione said. She was always too good at reading me.

"I have to talk to you and Ron later," I said before she could start.

Ron picked up what she didn't and put his arm casually around her shoulder and nodded. "I think we'll go wander back to the pond."

Gi— she always liked the pond.

Hermione started to protest, but Ron shook his head and led her away. We've all of us changed. Of all of us, Ron for the most.

"Harry," Arthur said softly.

"Mr. Weasley," I said and at his look winced. "Sorry, Arthur."

He nodded.

"About the arraignments for Gi—" the word was ash in my mouth but I forced my voice to remain level as I finished it "—nny's funeral. I—"

"We're handling it," Arthur said. "A private funeral in the Weasley graveyard as is our custom."

Fair enough. She wasn't a Potter. Would never be a Potter now.

"Okay," I sighed in relief. "Thank you. Do you know when..." his look made me hesitate.

"I'm sorry," he said uncomfortably. "A, er, well, family funeral."

I was puzzled for a moment, then I saw George and winced. Of course, a family funeral. They were burying Fred too. I'd been planning on asking about that anyway so it wasn't an issue.

"Harry, can we talk for a moment?" Bill asked leading me back up the path.

"I was actually hoping to speak to you in private," I said.

He frowned slightly, but didn't say anything.

"What was it you wanted?" I asked.

"I, um," Bill ran one hand back through his long hair. "Our family tradition is that funerals are private affairs."

I closed my eyes, "I don't want a media circus, Bill. I just want to be able to bury my girlfriend in peace."

"I know," Bill said. "But you can't."

"What?" I asked softly.

"What Dad didn't say is that it's for family only," Bill said. "If you were engaged..." he looked hopeful.

For a moment I wanted to flat-out lie. We'd talked about it. Merlin we'd talked about it. But it was just before his wedding and we didn't want to overshadow it. The news that the-Chosen-One was getting engaged would have beaten out Voldemort's death for the front-

page headline of the Daily Prophet, much less the marriage of Bill and Fleur Weasley.

And even if we'd just kept it amongst her family and our closest friends, would it have been right to spring it on them before? It'd still have felt like I was upstaging them, and I respected Fleur too much to do that. I didn't know Bill half as well, but you don't compete in a tournament that's killed a significant number of its contestants without learning something about your fellow competitors. Yes, she'd called me a 'little boy', in fairness I had been, and that Harry Potter probably wouldn't have cared.

I'm not him, I wish I was.

I thought I was going to draw my wand and strike him down. I mean, this was the family who'd become my own. I'd plotted the break-in at Gringotts with the help of Bill and traded stories about Norbert and the Hungarian Horntail with Charlie for stories about working on a dragon reserve. I had listened to Percy talk about cauldron bottom thicknesses and given a thousand galleons to the Twins so that they could open their shop and invent pranks. They weren't even going to let me see her body put in the ground because of some stupid tradition.

"No," I told him, my throat was tight with rage. Voldemort's wand was practically begging me to curse the man in front of me but I ignored it. "We talked about it, but we didn't want to upstage your wedding."

He winced slightly and I knew that I'd hurt him. Knew that he knew that we'd made that choice in respect to him and Fleur and that he knew what it cost me. A part of me liked that look, wanted to see more, but I pushed it down. Right now anger was bad. If I let it out it'd blow all my other defenses away. It'd meant I'd have to confront the source of my anger and pain.

"There were other concerns as well," I added after a moment. "Security concerns." Stupid traditions weren't his fault.

He raised an eyebrow but I didn't explain—I didn't need to—as I rooted in my pockets for a scrap of parchment and something to write with. "Can I visit after the funeral, or is that forbidden as well?"

"No, that'd be fine," he said.

"Good," I said. Parchment found, a twig was easily transfigured into a pencil. I wrote a short list, six flowers and a tree (seven being a magically significant number and all). Five of the flowers to show how I felt, one to represent me, one to represent her.

"Bundle these together and toss them over her coffin for me," I said.

He took the list. "Flower language," he said.

"I got Neville to help me with revision for the Herbology O.W.L."

"Really? I would have thought you studied with Hermione."

"Would you let Hermione know you were studying with someone else?" I asked.

"Not a chance."

"Exactly. Hermione's great, but Neville was the one to go to in our year for help with Herbology, I traded him for help with Defense after Umbridge shut down the DA."

"Okay, but...juniper?"

I shrugged, "Juniper is the root, you should pardon the term, of her name."

"What about Fred?"

"I'll come up with something later, there isn't a flower for 'annoying pain in the arse'. Wait," I thought for a moment. No, that wouldn't work, but maybe... "Halitosy and puffapods, make sure that you drop them in, not place them on the coffin."

Bill nodded, "He'd appreciate it...what were you originally thinking of?"

"Poison ivy."

"I'll find some," Bill said. "You said that you wanted to talk to me about something?"

"I'm looking to hire a Cursebreaker," I said. "Interested?"

"Doing what, exactly?"

"Breaking curses."

Bill rolled his eyes, "Okay. What kind of curses?"

"I don't know, but I'll need them broken when I find them. Knowing the people involved, probably ones that make you die a truly miserable death while everyone around you watches and is glad it wasn't them who tried to break it if you mess up."

"Charming," he said dryly.

I shrugged, "Job has its benefits."

"Such as?"

I hold out one of the leather Auror-shield folios.

"Besides pay," he said, taking it.

"Pay's probably miserable," I offered. "Go ahead and open it."

"An Auror shield?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Impersonating an Auror is illegal," he said, but didn't get rid of it.

"Check it again."

Bill looked at me, then drew his wand and waved it over the shield while chanting in something that sounded like violins backed by McGonagall in her cat-form raking her claws across a blackboard. "It's legit."

I nodded.

"You know who the new Chief of Aurors is?"

I nodded again.

Bill waited.

I waited.

Bill rolled his eyes. "Who's the new Chief of Aurors?"

"Me."

Bill frowned. "That's what Kingsley wanted to talk to you about last night, or was it this morning?"

"Yes."

Bill hesitated. "How much time do we have to decide?"

I shrugged, "Technically as much as you want; in reality...something less. At least eight Death Eaters killed their escort and escaped while they were being transported this morning. That's not including any that retreated during the fighting and managed to escape."

"I hadn't heard anything about that," Bill said.

"I just found out a few hours ago," I replied. "Tonks is seeing what assets the department has. I'm trying to recruit a few new ones."

Bill's expression grew concerned. "How is she handling Remus' death?"

I shrugged. I didn't know how I was handling his death. I knew exactly how I was handling his sister's.

I wasn't.

"Look, Bill, I did some researching a couple years back about careers. I do remember the life expectancy on Cursebreakers. That you're still alive and whole means you either weren't doing much, or were very, very good and very, very lucky."

"Thank you," Bill said dryly.

"Those are skills that I need, and I need people I can trust. Right now the only Auror I have any faith in at all is Tonks. Furthermore I need your contacts with the goblins."

"After what happened last time?" Bill asked warily.

"What about it?" I asked blithely. "We got what we were after, Griphook got what he was after, and yes, maybe we should have negotiated for passage out but we didn't and fair is fair."

"Except that Griphook didn't get what he wanted," Bill said.

"We said we'd give him the sword," I said. "I didn't say anything about tampering with any magic in it. Hell, Bill, I thought that was the end of the sword right up until Neville pulled it out of the Sorting Hat."

Bill didn't reply for a while. "I'll think about it. That's all I'll promise."

"That's all I'll ask for then," I said.

"What kind of deal were you looking for with the goblins?" he asked.

"I don't know, yet," I said. "I'm still kicking ideas around, but there must be some way that we can go after the Death Eaters' resources. If we can take away their funds, it'll be a lot harder for them to influence the Ministry and Wizengamot, purchase supplies, or even stay hidden."

"As I said, we'll talk about it," Bill said.

I nodded and wandered off to find Percy.

As it turned out I didn't have to avoid anyone to talk to Percy. Percy had clearly avoided his family so that he could talk to me. Funny that.

Four years ago he'd avoided his family in favor of his job in the Ministry. Three years ago he did abandon them for the same reason. That same year he'd written a letter to Ron telling him that I was really just an awful person who wanted nothing more to drag people down and watch the world burn.

Frankly, sitting back and watching the world burn didn't sound half-bad right now. Goodbye Death Eaters. Goodbye Daily Prophet. Goodbye Ministry of Magic. Goodbye all the people who thought me 'dangerous' and 'deranged' one year only to call me 'the Chosen One' the next.

But Percy had owned up to his mistakes and fought at the Battle of Hogwarts so clearly there was a decent person hiding somewhere in the dark corner of his bureaucratic soul. It gave me hope for the rest of the wizarding world, really it did.

Who was I kidding? I still wanted to watch it burn.

I gave Percy his badge and started to walk on towards the pond.

"Orders, Sir?" Percy asked.

I stopped. "Sir?"

"Er," he said, his neck turning red. "Chief of Aurors?"

"How long have we known each other, Percy?"

"Seven years this fall. Since the Hogwarts Express your first year."

I nodded. "You've known me since I started my first year. What's with this 'Sir' stuff?"

"Proper respect is essential in maintaining—"

"Your words, Percy, tell me in your words. Not some Ministry manual printed before Shakespeare was born."

Percy shrugged.

I sighed, it'd have to do.

"I suppose you can call me 'Chief'," I allowed, "Or maybe Commander Potter since that's my rank. I'd really prefer it though if you could call me 'Harry', especially if we're alone, or not in the office or field."

Percy smiled slightly, "Commander Potter, it has a ring to it."



I rolled my eyes. "Right now I need to know what I have to work with. How many people, what level of training, how much and what kinds of experience. How much funding we're getting, how we're fixed for supplies, whether they're for investigations, combat, or healing."

He nodded and I could practically see the gears turning in his mind as a quill scratched out a list of things to do.

"I need to know how many I can trust, if any collaborated with Voldemort, if so, then why," I continued. "Before we do anything else, and I have ideas, I want the department clean and us stopping dark wizards and witches. Right now the second is more important than the first. If we have to assign people to something harmless because of doubts, fine, as long as it's a useful something, unless they are a security breach."

"Understood."

"Also, make a note. I plan to get the department independent of the others. No separate detachments assigned to us, everything comes from in house. There's an MIB detachment assigned, I'm planning on keeping them and not giving them back. I'm looking to hire a Cursebreaker and maybe a medi-witch or wizard, as well as a potion brewer if I can find them. I'm thinking of contacting the DA and seeing if any of them are interested, but I haven't done that yet."

Percy nodded so someone had obviously explained our fifth and sixth years to him.

"They're good, but only getting probationary shields, for the most part," I continued, "At least until they can get more training. I know of one person who knew how the Death Eaters operated fairly well, we haven't spoken but he might be a useful candidate. Also, I have plans for a deal with Lucius Malfoy. If he gives us his full and complete cooperation he avoids Azkaban. If he withholds information or deliberately misleads us I'll drop him in Azkaban so fast he'll wonder what the portkey was. I haven't spoken with him yet, but I plan to and I don't plan to leave him a way out."

"That's quite a list of assets," Percy said.

"Not enough if we have to do it all ourselves," I said. "If you get a chance, talk to Bill. I've already offered to hire him away from Gringotts, and offered the idea, but I want to know if there are any options for seizing Death Eaters' gold. Without money it'll be a lot harder for them to hide out."

Percy nodded, "I think I can make it sound like I came up with a similar idea. I also have a friend in the Goblin Liaison Office..."

"Excellent. Try to keep things discreet, if you can."

"Of course. Will there be anything else?"

"Probably," I said. "Look, Percy, I'm in over my head. Put me in a fight and so far I've been able to hold my own, but I'm not an Auror. I don't have the training and skill sets. I have no idea what kind of paperwork is involved or how to run an investigation. Right now I'm just making it up as I go along and trying to surround myself with people that I know are good at what they do, and that I can trust."

Percy looked taken aback, "You...trust me? After that letter I wrote to Ron, you still trust me?"

"You were an officious rule-bound git when we were in school who took points from Ron and me for coming out of a girl's loo, instead of for brewing polyjuice potion in it so that we could sneak into the Slytherin common room and get Draco to confess to knowing who the Heir of Slytherin was," I said.

"The only thing that changed after you joined the Ministry is that you became an officious rule-bound git with a swelled head that was only made worse by an Imperiused Mr. Crouch leaving you in charge. I spent enough time around Madam Umbridge after she started her little reign of terror in Hogwarts to know just how sycophantic Fudge's sycophants were."

Percy had been getting steadily redder as I spoke, and I held up a finger to forestall him. "I've also spent enough time around Ron during the last almost-seven-years to know just what you Weasleys are like when you are being total idiots. I also know, from repeated experience, what you are like when you realize that you are being idiots. I'll admit that Ron's never stretched things out like the way

you have, but you seem to have come to your senses about both Fudge and your own idiocy.

"Or am I wrong?"

Percy opened and closed his mouth like a fish out of water for almost a minute. Finally, in a rather strangled voice, he said, "you're not wrong."

"See?" I asked. "Now, can you work for me without being an idiot?"

Percy frowned. "Why that? Why not ask about not being sycophantic, or an officious rule-bound git?"

"Because if you get sycophantic I'll kick you out ever faster than I'll slam Lucius in Azkaban if he doesn't cooperate, and that'll hurt your career more than Crouch did. As for the other thing, I'm practically counting on it. So long as you are a creative officious rule-bound git."

Percy laughed.

Why is it that when I'm being serious people think I'm funny, and when I'm trying to be funny people think I'm serious?

Percy took off to get something from the house and I told him that I wanted to go in together. He'd given me a strange look but agreed to wait until I'd talked to Hermione and Ron.

I found them by the pond, exactly where Ron had said they'd be.

The pond had been her favorite place, the one place she could count on having any privacy. Ron had never cared for it, and the twins had been wary of her even before she entered Hogwarts. I had a hard time imagining Percy bothering anyone unless it was to enforce rules of some type and the age gap was too large between her and her eldest brothers for them to really bother her.

"Hey, Harry," Hermione said softly as I approached.

I nodded in reply and stared out at the pond. "I thought George was still in St. Mungo's."

"They needed the bed-space," Hermione said. "He's taking about thirty different potions and isn't allowed to do any magic. He shouldn't even be walking around, as it is he's usually set up in the living room on the couch so he isn't alone."

I nodded. Being alone with nothing to do meant a lot of time thinking. Thinking was...bad.

"I'm sorry."

I looked at Ron.

"About what Dad said," he explained. "But it's—"

"Family," I said. "I know, Bill explained."

"Were you engaged? Gin talked about it but never actually—"

"No."

He looked at me and I turned away and searched the bank of the pond for a couple of flat stones.

"We talked about it," I said, slinging a stone into the pond so that it skipped three times. I'd never been out skipping stones before she showed me in the summer before fourth year. It managed to be both oddly connecting at the same time it was a nice mindless exercise to concentrate on so that I didn't have to think about her. "We didn't want to upstage Bill's wedding, and then I was pretending to be your cousin for a while...we agreed to make it formal afterwards but the Ministry fell and..." I shrugged.

"Oh," he said.

"Oh, Harry, I'm so sorr—"

I slung another stone, only two that time, too much power at a bad angle. The last thing I really needed was for Hermione's sympathy. Apparently she picked up on it because she chopped off what she was going to say in mid-word.

"How are you doing mate?" Ron asked.

"I've been better," I said.

"Harry, what is it?" Hermione asked. "What's wrong?"

"What do you mean what's wrong?" Ron demanded. "Even I can see what's wrong."

"No, Ron, she's right," I said, sending a third stone skipping across the water to sink near the middle of the pond. "Kinglsey made me Chief Auror."

"Chief Auror, are you certain?" Ron asked.

I looked at him.

He shrugged, "I heard he was going to open it up to anyone who fought at the Battle of Hogwarts. But Chief Auror, really?"

I held out my badge folio.

"Did you ask him why?" Hermione asked.

I shrugged. "I'm not sure I want to know."

"This is good though, right?" Ron asked.

"Unless this is a real clever way of getting me to do what Scrimgour wanted me to be," I said, "A poster boy."

"Or setting you up for a fall, you mean," Ron said. "Isn't that how it usually works with you and the Ministry?"

I snorted. Yeah, of all of us Ron had grown up the most. "Something like that," I said. "That's not all the bad news."

"You can tell us, Harry," Hermione offered.

"In addition to anyone that escaped during the battle, eight Death Eaters killed their guards and escaped," I said. "I also got the updated casualty list."

Ron didn't have anything to say to that.

"How bad was it?" Hermione asked.

"Seventy-three dead on our side identified so far, ten of them members of the DA and Lavender isn't expected to survive her injuries," I said offering her the list. "Another eight—seven now, I guess, with George out of St. Mungo's—in the hospital. Justin Finch-Fletchley is still missing. Since he wasn't found in Azkaban with the other muggle-born he's presumed dead."

"Oh God, oh-oh Merlin," Hermione said as Ron wrapped an arm around her shoulders and gave her a one-armed hug.

"So what's the plan?"

"Plan?"

"You always have a plan," Ron said. "Admittedly, it usually isn't much of one and it usually isn't very good, but that's what you have us for. Hermione to tell us what all will go wrong, me to come up with a better one, and you to get us all out of it when it falls in the crapper."

"Is that how it works?" I asked, trying to smile. It was funny, it deserved that much.

He nodded.

"Clean up the Auror's office, kill all the dementors, put the Death Eaters in Azkaban, clean up the corruption in the Ministry, make a justice system that works and is fair, oh, and we might as well find a way of integrating the entire magical community into it while we're at it."

"You don't do anything small, do you?" Ron asked.

"I guess not," I said. "Besides, it's not like I can play professional Quidditch."

"Don't say that, Harry," Hermione said. "You're a great seeker."

"In a school game, or maybe for the Cannons," I said. "I spent too much time on a Firebolt. I don't think I can adequately describe how outclassed the other brooms I played against were, Hermione. I let

the broom do too much of the work so I never developed my game to the point where I could play competitively on a professional level. I'm still a great flier, but I don't have that...edge I'd need to play Quidditch professionally."

"How can we help?" Ron asked.

I ripped my last stone across the pond, and took my shield back and tucked it away. "Well, for starters, I thought I'd give you these..." I pulled out two more badge folios and passed them over.

"Aurors, really? This is so cool," Ron said.

"I don't know," Hermione said. "I always thought about the Ministry of course, but I was thinking of a position where I'd actually be able to change the way it functions. Make it better. I mean, they lock people away without trials, and look what they did to you, Harry! They didn't even allow you to have an advocate, and if Mr. Weasley hadn't been tipped off about the change in trial time..."

I nodded. "I know," I said. "Believe me I know. But you have to start somewhere, I figured this was as good a place as any."

She was silent for a moment before nodding in agreement and accepted her badge from Ron. "How is Tonks?"

"Tonks?" I asked.

"A lot of people saw you two last night," she said.

"Look, Hermione, it's...last night was bad for a lot of us, all right?" I asked. "She got drunk, I took her someplace where she could sleep it off and I could keep an eye on Teddy. That's it."

She nodded. "What do you need us to do?"

"I don't know," I said. "I'm not ever sure if I'm going to keep the job."

"You're going to turn Shacklebolt down?" Ron asked with wide eyes. "But, but you're the Chief of Aurors! The youngest in—"

"Ever," I said flatly. "There's a reason for that, Ron. Aurors are supposed to have three years of training on top of their N.E.W.T.s."

Okay, so Kingsley's decided to set aside that rule. But I don't have the additional training, I don't have any experience with the job, and everyone knows it."

"You can't possibly think that Shacklebolt is setting you up to fail," Hermione said. "Do you think he's trying to use you somehow?"

I turned to her. "You're the second person today that's suggested that to me, Hermione. Is there something that I should know?"

"No," she shook her head sharply. "I just can't think of any other good reason for what he's doing."

"Neither can I," I said, though I already had ideas on how to counter it. "Look, Ron, contact Neville, most of the DA is still staying at Hogwarts, those that are alive and uninjured at least. I have no plans right now, but if I need you, I'm going to need you fast. Don't draft people in if they don't want to, give them a choice."

Ron nodded.

"Okay, Hermione, I want you to come in with me," I continued. "Set you up as a guest or something. Right now I want those badges to stay secret, or at least not widely known about."

As an addendum to my disclaimery-thing in chapter one, I don't own any of the quoted lyrics that I start my chapters with.



### Chapter 3-Policeman

Every night he comes home

With a six-pack all alone

Feeds the cat he lives with

He picks up the telephone

Needs to talk with someone

But the only love he's known

Was lost forever, he is a policeman

-Chicago-

Percy and I arrived in a dingy little alleyway in London. By all rights we could have used the employee entryway, but I wanted to arrive unobtrusively. Part of that was because despite what some people who worked in the Ministry claimed at various times, I positively hated the whole I-have-a-hyphenated-name crap. Another part was because I wanted to look around and see what the Ministry was like the morning after. Was it like the old Ministry under Fudge, the oppressive one under Voldemort, or was everyone still sleeping off the previous night's party.

Besides, there was something very wrong about flushing yourself down a toilet.

It used to be, or so Percy said, that employees were given general access through the wards. That had allowed apparition, or floo travel for that matter, into the Atrium level, and, at least in some cases, sub-levels that you were authorized for. Apparently the Department for Magical Games and Sports allowed its workers to apparate all the way into their offices.

When Thicknesse had taken over after Scrimgour died he'd restricted movement through the simple expedient of rekeying the wards, and then only keying in those people that Voldemort most trusted (his Death Eaters), had firmly under his grip (Imperius-controlled), or were rabid (Umbridge). I suppose there were some

other distinguishing characteristics of that last group, but I'd seen her foam at the mouth once and I prefer to call things what they are.

Pity that, the muggles had done such an excellent job keeping it off the isles.

We turn the corner and there's the usual collection of litter and refuse and, to one side, an ancient red telephone box. Its paint peeling, one window pane was broken and someone had drawn an extremely graphic image on another.

There's a yapping from up the alley and a black rat streaked around the corner towards us, only to freeze as soon as it saw us. It flicked its tail once as a trio of mangy dogs comes around the corner, and it decided that I'm the least threat because it hit my shoe running. Its claws carry it almost up to my shoulder before a claw slips or a muscle gives out and starts to fall.

I may not ever play a professional game of Quidditch, but there's a reason why I was made Seeker of my house team at age eleven. I found myself the proud owner of not a rat, but a very small, extremely thin cat with heavily matted black fur that literally crawled with living things and a suppurating wound behind one ear. Its ears were laid back, and its blue eyes were wide in fear, not anger, but they were tired eyes. Not physically tired, the emotional tiredness that says 'I'm tired of running, let come what may'.

I looked idly at the dogs. "Scram."

They scrambled.

"Harry," Percy made a strangled sound.

"What?"

"You can't, that, er, cat, it has..."

I looked at him and waited.

"...fleas," he said.

I nodded, "And lice, and probably mites and ticks too." It's amazing the things that live in the woods, and how much fun killing them can

be. Ron and I had spent entire evenings watching mosquitoes fly into this little ward we'd come up with that caused them to burst into flames when they crossed the threshold of the tent.

A tap of the wand, a spoken word, and all the vermin died. Washing it out of all that caked fur was going to be a pain, for the cat as much as me. What I didn't know was a good spell to clean out a wound that was infected and Percy didn't seem to either. On the upside it hadn't killed the cat yet and didn't look like it was going to anytime soon so I had a little time.

I tucked it out of sight in a pocket for which it seemed extremely grateful.

Percy and I crowded into the phone box and I punched in M-A-G-I-C. A polite voice asked us our business and I told it that I was here as the Guest of Honor at the victory celebrations and that Percy was there to remind me that I too was mortal.

Percy gave me a puzzled look and I shrugged and collected the badges.

Mine said 'Conquering Hero'.

Percy's said 'Lackey'.

"I am not a lackey," Percy said as the box began to descend under the pavement.

"Unfortunately I am a hero," I said.

Percy frowned, "What do you mean? You are a—"

"A hero is a person who goes on adventures, slays monsters, saves girls, keeps going on even while he's getting his friends killed, and defeats his arch-enemy. The stories never mention how miserable his life is, how adventures are filled with rain, and snow, and mud, and insects, and sunburns, and leeches, and living in constant fear of being found, of watching your friends get tortured and killed, and knowing that the only reason you're there is because some mad-man heard a prophecy by a batty old woman and decided that at age one and a half you're the biggest threat to his plan for eternal life and world domination."

I tucked my badge out of sight even though we were supposed to pin them in plain sight. "The real funny thing is how many of them are orphans or raised by 'evil' step-parents and always turn out good, and kind-hearted, and well-adjusted anyway...or it simply has no effect on their emotional growth—and yes I've been listening to Hermione again so don't bother asking."

"Um..." Percy frowned. "But you are."

I looked at him.

His ears tinged pink, "all those things, I mean."

"I am?" I asked, and didn't try to keep the surprise out of my voice. Hero? Yes...unfortunately. Well-adjusted? Not hardly. Good? I try to be, ask me later on how I'm doing. Kind-hearted? I have a stray-cat I rescued in my pocket...damn. I really am a story-book hero, complete with a 'saving people thing' as Hermione put it. How pathetic is that?

"You, ah, do know that you're supposed to pin that where everyone can see it?" Percy asked, gesturing towards the badge I'd tucked away.

"Are you going to?" I returned. "Besides, does anyone even read these things?"

He silently swept a hand at the badge he'd pinned onto the front of his robes.

Congratulations, Potter a voice that sounded an awful lot like Severus whispered in my mind, you have your first minion.

The telephone lift deposited us on the floor of the Atrium. It was packed with more people than I'd seen in it before, most of who seemed to be heading towards a single lift. It was a new lift, separate from the others and three times the size with a grille of silver instead of the customary gold. Sitting and observing all of this were the statues of Magic is Might.

I've been told that some works of art look better after repeated viewings and that others get better with age. Magic is Might was not

one of the former and I wasn't going to let it become one of the later. Actually, I was surprised it was still up and that nobody had gotten around to pulling it down yet.

I didn't recognize the wizard at the security desk, but he barely even looked at our wands before passing us through. He certainly didn't pick up on the additional wands I had.

I hadn't cleared the Atrium and already there were two things I wanted changed. I wasn't certain if I really had the authority to do it but I wasn't going to let it stop me.

"Please take the silver lift," the man said with a monotone that would have made Binns envious—if the ghost was capable of even noticing it—and the glazed look from repetition as passed us through. "Inquiries about missing persons should be made on level one. Damage and reparation claims should be made on level two. Testimonials about dark witches and wizards still at large should be made on level three. Level four is..."

We moved past before we could find out what was on level four and moved to the normal gold lifts and punched in the button for level two (Department of Magical Law Enforcement).

"Merlin," Percy said.

"From what I've read people went crazy last time with partying," I said. "I'd hoped we'd have a couple of days where the worst we'd have to worry about from most people is keeping the muggles from noticing."

"You don't think that's going to happen?" Percy asked.

"I've been the wizarding world's golden boy one moment and its whipping boy the next for years, Percy. I stopped trying to figure out what they'd do next about the same time they started mailing Hermione undiluted bubotuber pus because of that stupid article about us being together during the Triwizard Tournament."

The grille opened on level two and I took off down the hall. Offices of the DMLE were along the left interspersed with trophy cases bearing wands and artifacts from some of its most famous cases and arrests. The offices of the Magical Law Enforcement Squad were on the right,

followed by sub-departments: Magical Equipment Control, Misuse of Muggle Artifacts (Arthur Weasley's old job), Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects (his new one)—I needed to ask how spells could be confiscated.

We passed by more, and then the Improper Use of Magic Office. A hallway on the left led off to individual rooms for members of the Wizengamot, beyond it were the Wizengamot Administrative Services. A hallway on the right was labeled 'Support Services' followed by a host of acronyms of which I recognized only MIB, though MI-13 looked nice and suspicious. The Auror office was just beyond it.

I pushed the door open. I'd only been in here once before, but it was a lot like I remembered it. A long rectangular room filled mostly with office cubicles of which maybe half had the tacked on pictures and posters and the general lived-in look of occupied office cubicles that I vaguely remembered from the bits of a show on the telly I had watched from the doorway so as not to be seen by my relatives. The door to the hall opened at one end of one of the long walls. The wall opposite and the far short wall had doors, some with labels and many without.

A few heads popped up, but only a few. The door opposite the entrance opened and Tonks emerged followed by a man I didn't know. He moved slowly, but easily, across the floor and my hand disappeared inside his paw. He was tall, broad-shouldered and square-faced. Shaggy brown hair was cut on the long-side for muggles, but shorter than most wizards I'd seen, and he had a neatly-trimmed full beard of the same color. If Scrimgour looked like a lion, this guy was a bear, complete with lazy expression...probably right up until it was time to fight.

"Harry Potter," he said, it wasn't a question. "Winton Travers, Auror-Lieutenant."

"Percival Weasley," Percy offered.

Winton looked at him. "I know," he said, his voice the same, neutral, basso-rumble that he'd addressed me with, but you could still hear the disapproval in those two words.

He turned and went back into the room he came from and Tonks nodded towards him so I followed with Percy right behind me.

"Tonks, get in here," I said when she started to close the door behind Percy.

Travers frowned, but Tonks shrugged at him and did as I asked and closed the door firmly behind her.

The room was a large office, the wall it shared with the main room was see-through from this side. The walls were paneled with dark wood, and the dark blue carpeting was so thick it felt like I sank two inches into it. One side held a fireplace, opposite it was small seating area with a couch separated from two deep chairs by a coffee table. A large, ornately carved desk was set two-thirds of the way into the room. A pair of chairs were set before it, plus a much larger one behind it.

"My office?" I asked flatly.

"Yes," Travers said.

"Is there a kitchen or commissary here?" I asked.

"Kitchens," Percy said. "Run by house-elves."

"It isn't what I would call good food," Tonks warned, "but it's warm and there's a lot of it."

"That's fine," I said going over to the fireplace. Thirty seconds later and a small saucer of warm milk, and another with tuna on it appeared on my desk. It had taken me one truly miserable incident at Hogwarts, and another with Molly Weasley's cooking, to figure out that going from a Dursley-diet to full meals was not a good idea. Starting small and working up to a full-load was much better.

I upended the unused wastepaper basket (solid wood and carved to match the desk) and folded a small hand-towel (found in private loo attached to office) into it. I placed the small den on its side in the furthest corner of the office, put the small cat inside it, and then the two saucers. All three watched wordlessly as I shoved the tip of my wand in the now-empty pocket and rattled off a long string of vanishing and cleaning spells.

"Was that a cat?" Travers asked when I finished.

"Looked sort of like a diseased rat," Tonks opined.

I didn't respond except to heal the half-dozen or so cuts on my arm. The cat in question had taken one look at the other people before sinking its claws into me as hard as it could.

"Shall we begin?" I asked.

"Certainly," Travers said. "For starters, Auror Tonks should not—"

"Perhaps I should start," I said, cutting him off. "You should know, for starters, that half of everything ever written about me is a flat out lie. The other half, is, at best, heavily distorted. I have precious little reason to trust the Ministry at all and this office in particular. I have been threatened with the Cruciatus curse by a member of the Ministry, I have been actively attacked by dementors on Ministry orders, and that does not include at least three attacks by dementors in my third year at Hogwarts when they were stationed there because of fears of Sirius Black, which, I should add, they were unable to stop him from entering Hogwarts.

"I watched people from this office take my first friend to Azkaban, without a trial, because the Ministry 'had to be seen doing something'. I know for a fact that the man I should have been raised by spent more than a decade there, innocent and without a trial, after being imprisoned shortly after Voldemort's downfall. And that Scrimgeour did the same thing to a third man during his brief time in office. Three innocent people imprisoned in Azkaban, by three different Ministers, all three without a trial.

"I watched more people from this office chase Dumbledore out of Hogwarts, and the same people later hit a teacher I respect very highly with no less than five stunners at point-blank range without cause or provocation. Later, another person from this office tried to turn me into some sort of figurehead to show the people that the Ministry was 'doing something'.

"Tonks, is one of the few people in Ministry employ that I trust, and none of them, those that are still alive at any rate, do I know in any official sense."



I sank into the couch and grinned at Travers. "Consider me officially vented about my problems with the Ministry. You want a chance to return the favor?"

Travers gave me a slow look and raised an eyebrow, but his eyes were like Hermione's in *Flourish and Blotts*.

"Let me guess then," I said when he didn't reply though he clearly wanted to. Let's hear it for professionalism. "You're pissed because Shacklebolt made me an Auror when I haven't been through all the training that's expected, heck, I haven't even taken the N.E.W.T.s, and not only was I made an Auror, but he put me in charge of this whole office. I don't have any experience with the job, I have no experience with your procedures, and reports, and paperwork, and the other officious bullshit that comes with the job.

"Now here I am, sitting behind the desk that you thought was yours, or that you were going to get a promotion to somewhere higher up in the DMLE, but instead you're stuck here under a kid who doesn't know the first thing about being an Auror. Nor is he just any kid, he's Harry Potter. The whole thing stinks of favoritism of the highest order, and looks like I traded on my reputation and latest triumph—if you want to call it that—to be put in charge of the Aurors.

"Did I get all the high points?"

"Most of them," Travers said with a lazy smile as he sank without asking into a chair across from me.

Percy looked like someone had told him to go break a rule but didn't say anything as I gestured to the other chair and Tonks sank onto the couch opposite me.

"A couple of things I noticed on my way in, in order that I saw them," I said. "That statue, Magic is Might, I want it gotten rid of before lunch. It's offensive to me, to every muggle-born, every witch or wizard with muggle-born family or friends, every being that shares our community, everyone who lost someone in the war in general, and is rather ugly."

Percy looked at me wildly.

"What is it, Percy," I managed not to sigh.

"You, er, that is...you don't have the authority to do that."

I stared at him for a moment as I parsed out what he'd said. "I don't?"

He shook his head. "You don't have the authority to make changes to the Ministry, outside of the Auror Department, of course, and certainly not in matters of...decoration."

"Oh," I said, then I turned to Travers. "I don't care if I do or don't have the authority, have it done anyway. I don't care if you have someone go down there and blast it into tiny little pieces. I want it gone, and if anyone asks tell them that Harry Potter says that it's a bloody disgrace."

Travers made a snuffling snort and Tonks' hair rippled through several shades of light brown before returning to mousy brown.

"Point two, I want some security in the Atrium. At least have someone who can check wands and make sure nobody is sneaking a second one past him. Actually, given the crowds, better make it several someones—what is it, Perce?"

"The, er, Aurors don't have responsibility for Ministry security," Percy said apologetically.

I turned back to Travers, "I don't care if you get them from the Law Enforcement Patrol or whatnot so long as they get up there. Percy and I practically walked right past the guy without stopping and he didn't notice that I have two wands on me other than the one I gave him to check."

"Three wands?" Travers asked. He frowned, "You-Know-Who's, and one of the other Death Eaters?"

"Speculate all you want, and that's all I'll say on it." No way in hell I was telling them about the Elder wand, and I didn't really want it getting around that I was carrying Voldemort's. Knowing the Daily Prophet I'd no doubt claimed it as a prize because I fully intended to do him better, or worse, depending on your point of view.

Travers shrugged. "Your other two points?"

"If someone needs us in an emergency, that hallway is too damn long. Percy, I want you to look into what it'd take to move us closer to the lift."

Percy started to say something, then thought better of it.

"It's been more than a century since the last internal rearrangement," Tonks said.

"So maybe it's time for another one," I said. "Point four, some more security at the front of this office. I didn't see anything when I walked in that would stop someone from opening the door and loosing fiendfyre into the offices. Something Mad-Eye Moody would cook up—veritaserum checks, legilimency scans, and waiting an hour for polyjuice to wear off—would be too much. Let's see if we can't come up with something in between that and what we have that we can work with."

Travers didn't say anything but nodded again.

What to add to that. I had to know what I had to work with, really, before I made any sweeping changes.

"Um," I bit my lip. "I suppose you should also know that a lot of the things I've done I never really developed a plan for—" that was Hermione's job, the few times we actually had plans. "I do tend to react fast and instinctively, and generally my instincts are quite good—" when they weren't it got Sirius killed and it got us captured and Hermione tortured.

"I realize that I have a lot to learn. Travers, I'm going to need you to develop a lesson plan for me, something flexible. I have no intention of becoming glued to this chair, for one thing it'd drive me crazy—" far too much time to think about things, "—and from the cubicles outside it doesn't look like we have the manpower to have an Auror sitting on his arse all day...or am I wrong?"

"You're not," Travers said. "But you don't go into the field until we certify you."

Which wouldn't be until I'd been through the full three-year training program or whatever they cut it down to. "Limited field duty," I countered. "There's more to this job than just kicking down doors, even I know that. Some things, like investigating, can be taught, at least partially, on scene, right? Others we train for one at a time, and I go into the field on those even as training switches to something else."

Travers grimaced but nodded in agreement and made a note. "Anything else you want to discuss right away, or should I start?"

"Who was it that threatened you with the Cruciatus?" Tonks asked suddenly.

"You want a list?" I asked.

"The Ministry worker," she said.

"Oh, Umbridge," I said. "Speaking of, have someone go and arrest her."

"Charges?" Travers asked dryly.

"Conspiracy, attempted murder, attempted torture," I said. Then added: "High Treason," for good measure.

"High Treason?" Percy asked.

"Rebellion against Her Majesty's lawful government?" I asked. "I'm pretty sure that meets the definition."

"Interesting idea," Travers said.

"In the muggle world that's punishable by death by hanging," Tonks said.

"Really?" Travers asked.

That settled the question of his blood-status.

"We don't do that here," he said.

"No, instead we feed them to dementors," I said. "Look, Travers, Azkaban is a joke right now. The dementors, well, I hate them and as far as I know nobody really trusts them so—ethic concerns aside for the moment—why the hell are we even using them? I want every last one of them destroyed but I'm pretty sure we don't have the resources or manpower to do that right now, do we?"

He shook his head and sat back in his chair. "No, we do not."

"So we use what holding cells we have, but not Azkaban. I'm not about to allow show trials followed by hanging. But if we can prove it before an honest court I want the option."

Travers sighed, "That's the rub, isn't it. An honest court. The Wizengamot will listen to whoever has wealth, or the power to intimidate them. That might be one person with political pull or deep pockets, a small group of people with strong wands, or maybe even the mob."

"The mob?" I asked.

"Office slang for the magical population, the average witch or wizard on the street," Tonks said.

"Oh yes," I said, remembering one of Hermione's (many) rants. "The Sheeple."

Tonks choked as Travers blinked in puzzlement. "The what?" he asked.

"The Sheeple," I said. "Part sheep, part people."

"Ah," he said. "Yes, well... The Wizengamot..."

"Will let them walk free," I sighed. "And if we do without them..."

"How are we any better than they are? Or Fudge for that matter," Travers finished.

"Right now we're operating under Martial Law," Tonks reminded him. "We can hold her for the whole time without charges."

Travers nodded, "I'm just worried that doing it now might screw us later when we try to prosecute. It'll be done." He scribbled another note to himself, then passed around sheets of thick parchment. "These are our current manning documents."

I looked down to find a list of names I mostly didn't recognize, save six, well, seven—eight now, I suppose—but those six were nearly a quarter of the entire list. Next to each were a rank and a note on how long they'd been an Auror. "Twenty seven?"

Travers didn't quite wince, but he did nod.

"How bad?" I asked. I really did not want to know how many people they had lost but the number must have been huge.

"Seven known dead, six missing/unaccounted for, two of them have made contact and will be back in the next day or two, five on injured rolls."

"The whole office had only forty-five people in it when this started?"

Travers started to retort, then sighed and shook his head angrily. "Fudge."

"Okay," I said. "That explains a lot...but it doesn't tell me anything."

"The Aurors are responsible for two things," Tonks said.

"Stopping the spread of the Dark Arts and dark objects," I said.

"That's one," she said. "The other is that we're the only law enforcement branch that's supposed to interact with other magical beings. If a centaur kills someone, or a wizard attacks a goblin, we're supposed to be the ones assigned to the case."

"So inter-species work?"

"Exactly."

"But...?"

"But after Fudge took over he began drawing down the DMLE's funding," Travers said. "We didn't need what we had since You-

Know-Who was, we thought, gone and the Death Eaters were either in prison, if we could prosecute them, or were people we couldn't prosecute."

"Or had been thrown in Azkaban without a trial, but I'll grant you your point," I said.

"But after that the DMLE became a convenient place to raid for funds. Our responsibility to deal with inter-species crimes was handed over to the Department for the Regulation and Care of Magical Creatures. Arthur Weasley's old sub-department—"

"Misuse of Muggle Artifacts," I said.

"It wasn't originally called that, and was supposed to do with the muggles what the Aurors were supposed to do with other magical beings."

"Joint investigations of magical crimes against non-magicals?"

"Precisely," he said. "Fudge pushed for legislation that got it reduced to a two-person joke. The minimum Auror manning numbers are derived from population. Back when Minister Bagnold was in charge that was one Auror for every one thousand or so people. Since Fudge couldn't alter who was counted to determine total population size, he instead reduced the Aurors numbers by changing the ratio to one in every five thousand. Most of that was justified by shifting the joint investigation half of our work over to the DRCMC."

"Which didn't make any of them happy, except the Centaurs who I don't think even noticed," Tonks said.

"How many wizards and witches are there?" I asked.

"More than just witches and wizards," Travers said with a shake of his head. "That number is supposed to include people on the 'cleared to know' list, close muggle relatives of wizards and witches, the Monarch, the Heir to the Throne, the Prime Minister, and such. It's also supposed to include people who have been 'touched by magic', basically any muggle that has ever been subjected to a memory charm by the Obliviators. It includes the fifty or so centaurs living in the Forbidden Forest near Hogwarts, three communities of merpeople. Gringotts has nearly six thousand goblins between the

bank, records keepers, its legal branch for dealing with wills and the like, its internal security apparatus, precious metal and gem smiths, and all the rest. Muggles with ongoing magical afflictions..."

"Hold on, I thought muggles couldn't get magical diseases," I said.

"They mostly can't," Travers said.

"So what's the exception?"

"Werewolves," Tonks said softly.

I looked at her.

"Re..." she paused briefly, then cleared her throat and sat up straighter. "Remus said once that if he'd had to have been bitten, he wished that he'd been born without magic. Apparently the support services for bitten muggles is supposed to be impressive," her tone turned acidic, "though considering what the Ministry does for magical werewolves I suppose just about anything would be."

Hermione was right. Our society is so fucked up it defies belief. It might be easier to just sit back and watch the whole thing degenerate into total anarchy and build something new rather than try to correct all that was wrong. Who am I kidding, since when have I ever done anything the easy way?

"What are you writing?" Travers asked.

"Note to myself, there are some textbooks that need updating, badly." Particularly one that said that a werewolf's bite was uniformly fatal to muggles, but they didn't need to know that. "So there are what, two hundred and a quarter thousand?" I asked, having scratched out the math on a margin of one of the parchment sheets.

"More than three and a quarter," Travers said. "Remember, Ireland isn't a separate republic like it is in the non-magical world."

"Okay, but the numbers don't match up," I said. "And if our manning was anything like you said it was, this office had to have been huge."



Travers shook his head. "Before Fudge cut it down so that we didn't have a choice, the last time the Auror office was at its full authorized strength was back when Napoleon's pet necromancer was still alive and terrorizing the coast with his ghost fleet. Even under Fudge we didn't have near the number of Aurors that were authorized, and a bunch of them were people he forced on us and then he simply refused authorization for more Aurors. We were able to sneak a few more==like Tonks, here—in to make up for retirements and transfers, but never enough. We were effectively a third under our authorized strength, even with the investigations passed off to the DRCMC.

"Scrimgour changed that, but one year wasn't really enough time to do more than get rid of most of the driftwood and rehire some people who had retired or been fired."

"So we need more people," I said flatly. "Is there an academy, or is training all one-on-one?"

"One-on-one, for the most part," Travers said. "There used to be an academy, back when it looked like we were going to be fighting Grindelwald on this side of the Channel. When the first war started our numbers were more than triple what they were a year ago, and we recruited heavily up until he was defeated—what we thought was his defeat—but were only just able to stay ahead of the casualties we took. Unfortunately the retirees were among the most heavily hit population in the past year. We've managed to contact a few, but we don't have the numbers to start the Academy and largely they were retired because of age or medical issues."

There were maybe eight or nine in the DA, including those in the hospital. George would volunteer but I needed him in his shop. That would both boost public morale and bring us more defensive items. He'd need help too, Lee, maybe Angelina too since she lost Fred. And did I really have the right to draft them into this mess?

No. Unfortunately I couldn't think of many other options.

"The Hit Wizards, how different are they, training wise?" I asked.

Tonks shrugged, "Depends on what you mean. They have less training, but theirs focuses on combat skills, wand-work and the like. In that it's basically identical to what we learn."

Travers nodded. "They don't have the surveillance, tracking, investigative, and other specialized training we do. Why?"

"They're an adjunct to us, right? They're a sub-department of this department?"

"Yes and not exactly, though I can see why you'd think so," Travers said. "Technically they're supposed to be, but they became a separate after the DMLE started hiring people for it directly instead of it being an Auror-controlled special task force."

"We need numbers, and we need them now, not three years from now," I said. "So we're going to find people with skills that we need. They won't have all the skills that a fully trained Auror would, but they'll have some skills in focused areas and can be assigned to those tasks on an as-needed basis, right?"

Travers sat back in his chair and frowned thoughtfully. "So we draft the Hit-Wizards. People will moan and complain, but it'll be a done deal. Then we use them to do the door kicking they mostly do anyways, with one or two fully trained Aurors to keep everything nice and presentable, which will allow us to assign more Aurors to surveillance and investigative work."

"The problem is, they aren't fully staffed either. They had even fewer people than we did when things started and proportionally their losses are higher. I'd raid the LEP, but right now they're overwhelmed just trying to maintain order. Arthur Weasley's obsession with muggles aside, he's probably one of the best investigators in the DMLE."

"Really?" I asked. I knew that Arthur was dedicated to his job, good at it (or they wouldn't have moved him over to hunting down peddlers of counterfeit amulets and such), and honest. Best investigator in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement? No.

"John Watson thinks really highly of him. He says Arthur isn't the most deductive investigator he's seen, but he's one of the most thorough and has a good eye for detail."

"Huh," I said. "Well, let's start with the Hit-Wizards since they're supposed to be part of the Aurors anyway. Get Arthur, no, wait, I'll make the pitch myself. Since we're grabbing the Hit-Wizards we

might as well set up their special task force or whatever we decide to call it again, let's do the same with a specialized investigation squad for people with those skills and put Arthur Weasley in charge?"

"We can do that, do you think he'll accept it coming from you?"

"If I offered it to him, probably not, which is why I'm not going to ask," I said. I needed him too damn much for his nobility. If I had to I'd get Hermione to come up with a plan to abduct him from a spark-plug convention or something...maybe turn his rubber duck into a portkey?

Percy made a sound.

"Are you and your father going to have a problem working together?" I asked. I needed Arthur, but, damnit, I needed Percy to shove all the paperwork off on and help me figure out which Ministry rules I could ignore, which ones I could break, and which ones I at least had to pay lip-service to.

"I..." Percy made a face similar to one I'd seen Hermione make (once) when she had been asked a question in class and realized that she didn't have an answer. "I honestly don't know," he said finally.

Memo to self, make sure that Percy and Hermione don't have a chance to work together.

"Okay," I said. "We'll find out. Since we'll be drafting him we might as well get started on a team, those people from MIB seem like fine and stalwart fellows, do you think they'll do to start with?"

Percy choked and Travers made a sound similar to gravel being crushed that I assumed was a laugh. Tonks actually smiled and her hair managed to get to light red before dulling back to brown. Still, it was a sign of improvement.

"I don't think the MIB will appreciate us poaching one of their teams," Percy said.

"Offer them badges, appeal to their civic mindedness, offer them a raise—" another useful lesson via Vernon, maybe I should add him

to my Christmas card list? Nah "—and if that doesn't work, tell them they don't really have a choice," I suggested.

"How are you going to pay them?" Travers asked.

"Didn't Scrimgour authorize more money to the DMLE?"

Travers nodded, "True...but he was disgusted with our inability to catch Sirius Black. The funds were used to form new, specialized, sub-departments of the DMLE. Some of them were okay, many probably would have done well if they'd had a chance to really get organize and integrate all their people. Arthur Weasley's Counterfeit Charms and what not was probably the best as far as arrests, seizures, and convictions went, but they paid for it over the last year. We didn't see much additional funding comparatively, and what we did, Thicknesse cut down to even lower-than-Fudge levels.

"The Hit-Wizards did get increased funding, but one of You-Know-Who's agents was in the Personnel and Records and managed to get a lot of his followers into that department. It was actually renamed the Snatcher Office during the war."

Dear Merlin, and I thought Scrimgour was smart. Okay, I hadn't liked how he wanted to use me, and I thought his putting Stan in Azkaban was nothing short of criminal, but he'd seemed to be effective. So effective that Voldemort had waited until he'd had all of Scrimgour's guards under the Imperius before taking him down and even then Scrimgour had kept his mouth shut about me and what I was up to (what little he knew).

"I've got ideas for funding," I said.

"Oh?" Travers asked.

"If they don't work you may find yourself in charge after all," I told him. "In which case you might want to be able to truthfully deny you had no idea what I was doing."

"And that's not ominous at all," he said. "Do you have any other ideas to increase the number of Aurors in a hurry...besides the three you added this morning?" He tapped the list of Aurors. "I can't say I was overly surprised to see you offering badges to your friends, but

Draco Malfoy? He's a Death Eater, even if we aren't going to prosecute him."

I raised an eyebrow. "Kingsley told me about your little deal last night, but only that he and his family get a walk."

"Fair enough," I said. "Ron, Hermione, and I work well together, we've been friends for years, and to date nobody has been able to stop us." Though we damn-near stopped ourselves a few times. "I fully expect Hermione to only be with us shortly before moving to somewhere else in the Ministry though I'm not sure if even she knows where to, yet.

"Draco...is complicated."

"Uncomplicate it," he ordered.

"I saved his life a couple of times yesterday, Merlin, was it only yesterday? It seems like a lot longer. His mother lied to Voldemort, which...maybe saved mine, maybe didn't, but almost certainly allowed me to defeat him when I did." If I hadn't, someone else would have sooner or later, but it probably would have been a lot later.

"I confronted them this morning. Lucius Malfoy will give us full and enthusiastic cooperation to us. Partly because if he doesn't his former colleagues still out there will turn on him in an instant, partly because if he doesn't I promised to throw him in the deepest, darkest, hole I could find that he couldn't get out of. He doesn't get prosecuted for any of his past crimes, he allows us full access to his house, and turns over to our department all Dark, and or illegal, items in his possession...and if so much as one hair of his ever crosses the line..."

"That deep dark hole you mentioned?" Travers asked.

I nodded.

"Good," he grunted. "And the son?"

"I have several reasons. First, both Albus Dumbledore and Severus Snape saw something in him worth saving, both of them are, were, people that I respect highly."

"You like Snape?" Percy asked.

Tonks was watching intently and, hell, the man deserved honesty.

"Not particularly," I said. "I don't hate him, much, anymore, either. Despise how he treated me, yes, but not hate him...I don't think. Suffice to say he gave me the final pieces I needed in order to understand how to beat Voldemort."

"You need to come up with something better than some feelings towards two people who are dead," Travers said coldly.

"He's spent his whole life around the type of people we're supposed to be putting away. He thinks like them in a way that I don't, that nobody I know, so far as I know, does. He's powerful, smart, fast, and able to see a few things and make connections between them that most can't, and has a flare for improvisation and planning. On the balance he is arrogant, conceited, annoying as hell, and tends not to think which means he often doesn't see those things or make the connections he otherwise would.

"Did he join the Death Eaters? Yes. Did he give them a way into Hogwarts? Also yes. Did he disarm Albus Dumbledore and bring about the events responsible for his death, yes. Did he do the deed? No. When it came down to it Draco was a scared little boy who found himself in over his head, and ultimately was incapable of cold-blooded murder."

"And because of that you trust him?" Travers asked.

"Trust him?" I blurted. "Hell no, I don't trust him. But he could prove useful and I rather he's somewhere where someone I do trust can keep an eye on him, rather than him running around in the dark and never knowing when he's going to pop up next to make my life miserable."

"Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer?"

I shook my head. "If you'd asked me last year I probable would have told you that he was. But Draco was never my enemy. He thought I was his...rival, I guess. He was a continual annoyance that I'd have just as soon would have done without, but he was never my enemy.

With Voldemort always looming in the background, Draco was too...petty to be my enemy."

Travers nodded silently.

"Do you have any other people you want to draft?" he asked after a moment.

"I'll probably ask Arthur if he has anyone he wants to bring with him. Percy, do you know of anyone you want to help on the administrative side?"

He looked surprised at the question, but then shook his head. "Give me a few days to get a grasp on how much, and what kinds, there are."

"Done," I said. I turned back to Travers, "There were a couple of other people who fought last night. One of them, Dean, is actually helping the MIB team, something to do with sketches. I thought I'd ask a couple of them. What do you think?"

"I think it's a terrible idea," Travers said. "Unfortunately it doesn't matter what I think, Minister Shacklebolt okayed our hiring anyone who participated at Hogwarts last night, even if they haven't taken their NEWTs, provided that they were in their seventh year."

"Excellent," I said.

"We'll need some kind of testing to find where they're strongest skill-wise," Tonks spoke up at last. "Set up a program to train up those individual skill-sets, and then assign them based on those while we cross-train them for the other duties we have."

Travers grimaced, but nodded in agreement, "It'll boost our numbers fastest, I guess... We're still going to have to cut people loose to teach them."

"Maybe," Percy hesitated when we all turned to look at him. He cleared his throat nervously, "maybe if we had a list of specific spells and potions we could hire an expert, or even several, in the appropriate fields. Those people could teach the new spells, and once those in the training programs had mastered them then an Auror could teach them how to use them."

"You may be on to something there," Travers said. "Tonks, why don't you get together with...Sedgwick, I think, he's being released to light duty by St. Mungo's later today, and put together a couple lists. Ask around, for what spells the others think are necessary, and which ones they think would be helpful. And see if you can find one of the old curriculums from the Academy."

She nodded and jotted a short note down.

"I think there's a cursebreaker who, if we can't recruit, we can at least put on retainer," I continued. "Let's see if there's a Healer we can do the same with."

Travers nodded, "Preferably someone who can take care of themselves in a fight, if possible."

Percy nodded as he wrote more notes.

"Okay, that's personnel and funding, what about investigations, how many Death Eaters, supporters, and collaborators are out there?"

"You want to go after them all?" Travers asked.

"You think we shouldn't?" I returned. "Let's deal with the Death Eaters and active threats first. But Voldemort would never have gained the power he did if there wasn't a society that supported him and a government that is corrupt enough to let it happen. That, both of those, have to change or we're just going to be seeing another 'Lord Voldemort' in a couple decades."

"The Office of Professional Responsibility is supposed to conduct all investigations into Ministry workers," Percy said.

"Not originally, Fudge spun that office off of the Aurors not two months into the job," Travers disagreed.

"Then we'll take those responsibilities back," I said. "Are any of the people in it worth keeping?" I wasn't expecting an affirmative response, given how blatantly corrupt the Ministry had been in the past.



Travers grimaced, "I'm not sure if there even are any people assigned to it."

How marvelous. I didn't think it was possible for a government this bad to exist outside of poorly written fiction and normal fare for Hollywood.

"The Death Eaters have priority," I said. "I'll ask Constance Hammers about setting up a task force with a few Aurors and also members of the LEP to start going after the slime in the Ministry. I do, however, fully intend to clean up the Auror department first, or perhaps I should say: 'concurrently with our other investigations.'"

Travers started to object, but then nodded unhappily. "I'd like to say that you won't find any in the Aurors, but I won't. Who are you going to have head that investigation, Tonks?"

Tonks grimaced slightly.

"She'd be the obvious choice, we've known each other for years, it's no secret that I considered Remus and uncle," I was surprised at how level my voice was when the name came out.

"We kept it a secret that he's Teddy's Godfather," Tonks added, which told me clearly how much she trusted both him and me, always nice to know. "We aren't going to advertise...but I don't know how long we can keep it a secret. Which means I'm too close to run the investigation; it'll look like Harry is starting a witch hunt if I do it."

"Well, I'm not the man you want running it," Travers said. "Not if you want me to work as your Second in Charge." He looked doubtfully at Percy.

Percy stiffened in his chair. "Me? I'm hardly qualified to conduct such an investigation."

"Relax," I said. "I'm not telling who I'm going to have running it, partly because I haven't decided yet, but I have no intention of telling anyone when I do."

"What, exactly, are they going to be looking for?" Travers asked.

"Worried?" I asked.

He brushed it off. "In any investigation there is almost always some little irregularity or another. Some misfiled paperwork or other, some Gringotts statement that can't be fully accounted for, a prisoner complaint alleging abuse or mistreatment..."

"I see your point," I said and sat back in the couch. "I'll need to give it some thought, but if it eases your mind, I have no intention of turning this into a witch hunt."

Travers nodded, "Discuss any cases that are started?"

"With someone, yes, I won't make that call on my own. Fair enough?"

"Agreed." He shuffled some pieces of parchment. "Currently there are five major cases on-going. First, the escape of eight Death Eaters from custody this morning. Antonin Dolohov and Augustus Rookwood are the big names on the list. The others are the Carrow twins, Rowle, Selwyn, Yaxley, and Gregory Goyle."

"Second, Bellatrix Lestrangle."

"She's dead," I said.

"She was reported dead," Travers corrected. "Never believe the first reports immediately after a battle. The reported death count was low—when it's big and chaotic that's more often the case than not. Some reported to be alive weren't, and the reverse. Lestrangle was severely wounded, was taken in custody to a secured wing in St. Mungos which she vanished from this morning. Time coincided with a portkey activating in the vicinity that hasn't been accounted for. Best guess right now was that it was time-activated and she'd swallowed it before the battle."

That was a level of paranoia right out of Moody's book. Especially considering she was so confident of winning.

"Three and Four are related," Travers continued. "Three concerns those Death Eaters and supporters at the battle last night but retreated or otherwise escaped capture. Mostly they're low-level thugs hired as Snatchers, Voldemort recruited a number of wizards and witches from eastern Europe, but at the top of the list in Fenrir

Greyback. He was reported as injured, unconscious, and bound, but the post-battle recovery only found the ropes used to bind him and some blood."

"And four?"

"Targeting pretty much the same people, but specifically those that weren't at the battle," Travers said. "Some of them are Death Eaters, others are vampires and non-magical werewolves, among others."

"How much power do I have to direct investigations?" I asked.

"Technically?" Travers asked. "A lot. If you order us to do something illegal, don't count on it, or at least not on any Auror that you'd want to be an Auror."

"Okay, as far as three and four go," I said. "We go after the Death Eaters, no question. See if you can find a researcher who can figure out if the Dark Mark has to be taken voluntarily or if it can be forced."

"If it's voluntary that's proof of conspiracy and aiding a terrorist organization," Travers nodded in satisfaction. "Good idea."

"As to the others, the werewolves—I don't care if they're magical or not—and vampires, and giants, and even witches and wizards, accusations aren't enough. Unless you have some specific evidence we don't do a thing. If we start arresting werewolves in lots simply because of what they are, then we're no better than what Fudge and Umbridge...and worse, we'll send a message to every non-human that what Voldemort said about us was true."

Travers didn't look happy, but nodded in agreement. "We don't really have the personnel, or even the holding space, to deal with anything like the numbers we'd drag in otherwise."

"People will object," Percy said.

I looked at him.

He shrugged, "They'll say that you're selectively enforcing the laws because of your past friendship with a werewolf."

"So?" I asked.

"So, selectively enforcement is illegal," Percy said. "It doesn't matter if it's because of bribery, blackmail, or because of your personal feelings of an issue."

I frowned, "You mean somebody actually passed a law that says we have to arrest people because they're werewolves?"

"Unless they're specifically exempted," Travers nodded. "It was passed by Scrimgour's administration just before he was killed."

"Well fuck it," I said bluntly, privately glad that Hermione wasn't around. "We're under martial law, which means anything anyone passed is just so much wasted parchment."

"Harry, totally ignoring the public's sensibilities—" Percy began.

"What sensibilities?" I demanded. "You want I should release all the muggleborns that Voldemort stuck in Azkaban and go out and replace them wholesale with people infected with a...a...a disease that turns them into murderous beast every twenty-nine days? Well I'm not going to fucking do it. I'm not going to stand for it. And if anyone tries I'll..." I needed a real good threat and I came up short.

"Right," I said, pushing ahead. "What's number five?"

"All the other things we should be investigating and doing, but are either pushing off or ignoring because 'they prove what Voldemort said is true' or 'we'll get to them later'," Travers said.

Great, the bear was a comedian. All he needed was a pink tutu and some music to dance to.

"What's next?" I asked.

"Well," Travers said. "There's a lot of boring paperwork I guess you could get started on, or you could meet everyone."

I'd brought Percy along for paperwork, he practically drooled and promised—as Travers pushed me out of my office—to have brief, concise summaries waiting, along with parchment marked for me to sign. There was a soft, questioning: 'Mew?' and the cat poked its head out of the waste-basket den. Then it darted across the floor,

jumped, landed claws-out on Travers' backside and clawed its way up to his shoulder before hopping to mine and dropped down into my pocket.

Weird cat.

Travers cursed as he applied healing charms over the small cuts, then he and Tonks took me out into the long room and introduced me to the four other Aurors currently in.

Savage—who dressed in tweed robes, and promptly began polishing his spectacles when I was introduced—was a slight, older fellow with a small, neatly trimmed dark grey mustache, and short, neatly trimmed light grey hair. He gave me a polite nod and turned back to his cubicle. Domesday was the only woman other than Tonks present, she was taller than Ron, had broader shoulders than Crabbe, and when I was introduced she cocked her head so that a thick braid of honey-colored hair fell away from her neck, displaying a thick knot of white scars across her throat.

I shook the hair covering my scar out of the way, and raised an eyebrow at her. If she had one of those I'd eat a shoe.

She crossed impressive-looking arms across a very impressive chest and nodded the point. Challenged raised and beaten, point to the man-whose-name-shall-ever-be-hyphenated.

Next was a wiry man with dark hair cut so short you could see skin on the sides who introduced himself as 'Igor'. I started to ask why the first name, given that the others had preferred last, but he cut me off.

"Don't ask, suffice to say it's worse than Nymphadora," the words and tone were polite enough. The sneer was anything but.

"Don't call me 'Nymphadora'," Tonks growled.

"I didn't," he said, the sneer was replaced with a friendly-looking smirk for his coworker.

I hadn't known that smirks even could be friendly, but it was nice to know that Tonks had other friends who were worried about her. I'd

gone long enough without any to know how truly miserable that could be.

The last Auror was named Watson—Dr. Watson, he'd said as soon as Travers introduced him. He reminded me a lot of Dumbledore, he was old—older than Moody had been, maybe even older than Albus had been—his hair was white, but neatly trimmed, and he had a magnificent, bushy, white mustache. He had a burly frame, a square jaw, and a hand like a vise, and gave me a look that was more appraising than Savage's indifference, Domesday's challenge, and Igor's contempt.

Percy was happily going through a small mountain of scrolls and parchment, both Travers and Tonks had things to get to work on, and none of the other Aurors seemed to want me around. I wasn't sure if I even wanted to be around. About the only person who appreciated me was the wounded, emaciated cat riding in my pocket.

I went for a walk.

I ended up making it most of the way back to the elevators before I had my next bright idea. Fortunately it was right by the office I needed.

Unfortunately the Office of Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects was empty. Empty, except for the one person I needed to see.

Arthur Weasley looked up when the door open, and paled when he saw me. "Harry, er, you shouldn't be here."

"Debatable," I said.

"Harry, about this morning—"

"Don't," I said sharply. I took a breath, released it slowly. "Right now I'm trying very hard not to be totally pissed off at you, but if you start trying to apologize or justify it, well, it won't be pretty."

He nodded warily and I sighed.

"Look, Bill explained it to me. Family tradition, and all that. I know you meant nothing by it. I met enough of your family at Bill's

wedding to know that no matter how you feel about my attending some of them won't see it that way, and, well, the last thing either of them deserve is a spectacle like that."

Arthur relaxed and nodded. "Thank you."

"Yeah, well," I shoved my hands in my pockets. That darn cat curled around my left hand and began licking it.

"Harry, what are you doing here?"

"You heard that Shacklebolt is allowing all those who participated in the battle last night join the Aurors without taking the NEWTs?"

"He is?" Arthur asked. "That's great, isn't it? Just what you wanted."

I smiled bitterly. "Oh yeah, just what I wanted...except that he's made me Head of the Auror office."

Arthur blinked at me. "Excuse me?"

I handed him my badge.

He stared at it for a moment as though he'd never seen one, then poked it cautiously with his wand, the way I'd seen him do to something the Twins had left laying around.

"Why?" he asked finally.

I shrugged. "I have a couple of guesses. He wants me as a figure-head, and he's suffering from one Cruciatus too many are the current favorites. Find out who has the office pool and put in five galleons for me on 'bizarre award'."

Arthur nodded, "I can do that."

I looked around the empty office. "I'm kind of surprised that you came in today, actually."

He grimaced, "They called in most of us to help keep the celebrating under control. I remember what it was like last time. This is worse."

"Depends on how you view things, I guess."

Arthur smiled. "I'm surprised that someone didn't drag you to one."

"Not seeing a whole lot of reasons to celebrate," I said flatly.

"So what can I help the Chief Auror with?"

"Well, a couple of Death Eaters escaped last night, I'm kind of hoping that you had a way of tracking counterfeit defensive magic that could be applied to tracking legitimate defensive magic."

"You're hoping that they're under wards of some kind so that we can track them?" Arthur asked.

I nodded.

"Maybe there is something that could be adapted, but spell-creation, or even adaptation, isn't really my field," Arthur said. "I'll have someone look into it though?"

I nodded.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

"I could eat," I said.

The Commissary was tucked away on the first level that took four turns, three doors, two corridors, a picture gallery, and five minutes to get to (from the time we got off the lift). We didn't just need to get rid of everyone, this entire place needed to be burned to the ground, well, underground. Maybe if we started from scratch we could make something that actually worked.

Of course, that might have just been my frustration. Hogwarts didn't make much sense either, internally, at least not at first, and I wouldn't change one stone.

Except for that one in my first year hidden behind a three-headed dog, a trap door, and some inane puzzles.

Oh, and that one in my second year that was carved into the sink, the one that hid the chamber of secrets.



I insisted on paying for lunch. As Tonks had promised, the food was bland—the shepherd's stew was practically tasteless—but hot and plentiful.

"How'd you like a different job?" I asked Arthur as I finished my first bowl and a second appeared on the table as if by, well, magic.

Arthur choked on his beer. "You did that on purpose."

"Sorta," I said. "What do you think?"

"You mean with the Aurors, I presume?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Harry, I'm too old to go running around with the young people."

"Watson is older. Do you know what our numbers are like?" I asked before he could object.

He shook his head. I told him. He did a fish impersonation. It was pretty good, actually.

"I'm building that up as fast as I can, but there isn't time to give everyone the comprehensive training that Aurors used to get."

"I can see that," Arthur said slowly. "Where do I fit in?"

"We're going to through together a couple of sub-units based on specialties," I said. "The Hit-Wizards are being folded over into the Aurors and they're going to form the backbone of our tactical unit, the people who go in and bust down doors and actually do all the flashy stuff expected of an Auror. There's going to be a surveillance unit to cover that part of our duties, and probably a dedicated group to ferreting out criminals in the Ministry."

"And me?" Arthur pressed.

"I'm told that you're one of, if not the, best investigators in the DMLE," I said. "So, you'd be doing pretty much what you were, the targets will have changed, as will the badge, but other than that..." I shrugged. "Once we have the squads up and running we'll worry about cross-training people into all the tasks, but let's be realistic,

some people are going to be better fighters, others are going to be better investigators."

"And you want me to be one of those investigators," he said.

"No," I said. "I want you to be in charge of the investigators."

"I? Harry I don't—" he stopped abruptly. "If this is because my family and I have—"

"Stop," I said, gesturing with my spoon.

Arthur closed his mouth.

"No, I am not offering you this because your family has always been kind to me, and because some of your kids are among my closest friends, or because I considered you to be the family I never had," I said, and he relaxed.

"On the other hand," I continued and he stiffed again. "Because of all those things I know that you, Arthur Weasley, are dedicated, hard-working, and honest. I know that, despite the misuse of your abilities and talent, you remained committed to your job. And I know that you never hesitated to tell me what you thought I needed to know, despite what others may have thought.

"So no, the offer isn't because of what you and your family mean to me. But it is because of what you and your family mean to me that I know why I want to hire you...if that makes any sense."

Arthur nodded, "That's very well thought out, Harry. I'm impressed."

"I've been taking lessons from Hermione," I said. "If you can think of one or two others you'd like to bring with you, give Winton Travers their names and told him that I said you could have them."

"I haven't agreed yet."

I shrugged, "There is one other thing."

He didn't say anything but looked at me inquiringly.

"Percy is working in the Auror office as my...administration assistant, I guess," I said. "He was happily shuffling parchment work for me when I left."

Arthur paused. "We...made up, if that's what you're asking."

"I'm asking if you, as the lead investigator for the Aurors, would have a problem working in the same office as Percy," I said. "Percy did not object to the idea when we brought it up."

"I'll need a little while to think on it, and I need to discuss it with Molly," Arthur said.

"That's fine," I said. "I wouldn't want you to rush to a decision...but at the same time, we don't have a lot of time. There are at least nine Death Eaters on the loose, including three in Voldemort's inner circle, and the longer we wait the more time they have to hide in."

"Understood," he said.

I finished eating. It took me two wrong turns, a right turn, and a hall filled with statues of previous Ministers of Magic to find the lifts. I headed down to the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. Stood to reason they had a vet or something around.

It took me four offices, three secretaries, two autographs, and a pose for a picture to get to the 'Magical Pet Registration Office'. I found myself directed to a blue-painted, sterile-looking room occupied by a bored-looking witch that 'oohed' when she saw me.

I pulled the cat, hissing and clawing from my pocket and set it on the bench. "I, err, adopted it this morning," I said, holding the cat down as it tried to escape. "I already killed the vermin, but I don't want to try a healing spell I know on a wound that old."

The witch cooed at the cat as she poked it with her wand. The cat clawed her in reply.

There was a jet of orangy-red flame from the wand and the smell of burning fur, but the wound was clean when she was done.

"That wound's too old for any of the better healing spells," the witch said. She went to a cabinet and drew out a potion vial filled with some thick purple stuff. "Smear this on the wound, three times a day. This vial has enough for one day. Go to Diagon Alley and buy enough for a week."

I nodded and thanked her for the vial. It was heavier than something its size had any right to be.

"Do you want to register her?"

Her? Oh, the cat. Heh. "I don't—"

"Our registration is good in the muggle world," the witch continued as if I hadn't spoken. "Full spells for disease protection, as well as a tracking charm you can activate if she runs away."

"Oh, well, I guess," I said.

"Good," the witch said cheerfully and began poking with her wand again.

I vaguely recognized some of the spells as variations of spells we'd learned in Care of Magical Creatures, only much more advanced. The only one I recognized for certain was the one that Remus and Sirius had used on a rat-shaped Peter Pettigrew in order to force him to change back into human.

Nothing happened on that spell, but the next one must have turned up something strange because the witch went from...burbles, I suppose, to Hermione-studying-for-O.-intense.

"Fascinating."

Complete with Spock impression.

"What is?" I asked.

She looked at me blankly as the cat tried to rip the wand from her hand.

"What's fascinating?" I repeated.

"Oh, did you know she's descended from an animagus?"

"She's what?" I blurted.

"Descended from an animagus," she said. "More than two generations, the spell isn't that accurate past generation two, but it doesn't pick up past generation five at all, so I suppose that is something."

"You mean a—"

"She has some witch or wizard ancestry? Yes. Probably a wizard, I'd have a hard time imagining wanting to stay a cat for the full gestational cycle and the animagus transformation is fatal for a developing fetus."

Every day you learn something new. Mostly, in my life, it makes me wonder if I wouldn't have been better off if I'd never gotten a letter to Hogwarts and gone to Stonewall and studied to become an accountant or something. I mean, a cat? Ick.

Not to mention other problems. "Is she, well—"

"Sapient?" the witch asked, shaking her head. "Oh no. True sentience, or at least a human-like intelligence, develops in twelve and a half percent of all 1st generation cases. Of those, maybe one in twenty will develop in second-generation off-spring—though that number is higher if the second parent is an animagus or other 1st generation—but there's been no recorded instances of it in third-generation or more. And as I said, the spell has determined that she's at least three generations removed."

So not what I wanted to know. It's ironic. I was pissed at Dumbledore for years for not telling me things. Maybe ignorance really is bliss and I was just too ignorant to realize it.

I paid the fee and signed the registration papers, signed another autograph for the witch, and left.

I arrived at the lift just as Kingsley Shacklebolt and Connie Hammers were getting off.

"Harry, just the wizard we wanted to see," Kingsley said with a broad smile. "My office. Now."

I got in the lift and he hit the button for level one.

"You need to work on that, Shackbolt," I said.

He looked at me. "Work on what?"

"The office calling," I said. "I've seen better, a lot better, and that's not even factoring in Severus."

Hammers glared at me, but neither said anything.

We got off the list, trudged through three corridors, two sets of offices, a door way, and found ourselves in antechambers of Kingsley's secretary's secretary's secretary or some such. Two more doors and a security checkpoint got us cleared to his secretary who nodded at us briefly and cleared us in.

Kingsley's office was better than mine (even if the security slightly more ridiculous). His desk was big enough to land a muggle fighter-plane on, and the walls had been painted to appear as though the office was in a high tower looking down on muggle London. In fact, the walls didn't even look like they were even there, and the view of the Thames was fantastic. There was a thick carpet in something Hermione had called 'tyrian purple', and so thick it felt like I sank up to my ankles in it.

Hammers shut the door behind us, and it disappeared into the wall.

"How do you find the door when you want to leave?"

"I'm still getting the hang of it," Kingsley said, "And I still haven't found the loo."

"It's right here," Hammers said, pushing open a door on another wall.

It was as good as anything Hogwarts had to offer, if not better. Everything was marble, except for the things that were gold. There was a shower big enough for both the home and visiting Quidditch teams to shower at once, a bathtub large enough to dock an aircraft

carrier for when the plane wasn't parked on his desk, large towels that seemed to be ninety percent air.

"And I thought the Prefect bathroom was nice," I said.

"When did you get to see the Prefect baths?" Kingsley asked. "You weren't one."

"Fourth year, I needed a something big enough to dump the egg in so I could listen to it. The sinks were too small and it was too cold for the lake."

"Find out anything interesting?"

"Found out that the hostages were being held at the bottom of the lake—so I had to go in anyway—and that if we didn't get them back in one hour they'd end up sleeping with the fishes," neither Kingsley or Hammers seemed to get the reference so I added: "Permanently. Also that Moaning Myrtle liked to come up and spy on the guys."

Kingsley shuddered slightly. Guess who made prefect.

I sat down on his couch. It was an old, battered, brown leather thing that had been much patched and repaired. One leg was mismatched, and another was missing entirely and had been propped up by a stack of books. It was the only old-looking thing in the office, but it was a lot more comfortable than mine. "Trophy from the Auror office?" I asked.

"My first couch from my first office," Kingsley said. "It's great, isn't it?"

"Wonderful," I said.

Hammers made an outraged sound. "If you two boys are quite done?"

I waved at her. "By all means, boss-ma'am," I said.

"Do you know what I can do?" she asked.

"Yes, you can correct the mistake I made when Kingsley caught me in a weak moment," I said.

"You may think yourself clever," she began.

"No, actually, I don't," I said.

"Harry, please," Kingsley said.

I looked at him. "What? We're both too busy for you to call me up here for polite chit-chat," I said.

"It's what you're doing," he said.

"I'm doing what you hired me to do," I said.

"You can't just blatantly reassign people from other departments," Kingsley said.

"Then what the hell am I supposed to do, Kingsley?" I asked.

"You're supposed to sit yourself in your chair and let Winton do his job," Hammers said.

Kingsley winced.

Hah. So I was a figurehead. Go figure. Which begged the question of why Constance Hammers had dropped off those reports this morning.

I kicked my feet up on the coffee table and smiled up at her. "I told Scrimgour to go get lost when he tried to hire me to be his little mascot. What in the name of Merlin's big brass balls made you think I'd be one for you?"

"Why you little—"

"Constance," Kingsley barked.

She paused with her hand on her wand. "What?"

"Stop it," he said, the nodded at my right hand where I had my wand pointed right at her heart. Spring-loaded wand holster, it'd been a long year. "Harry that goes for you too."



"She started it," I said petulantly. Then shook my head, "Sorry, I'll try and play nice." I turned to Hammers. "If you have a specific complaint?"

"You shanghaied the entire Hit-Wizard office and kidnapped my best MIB team," she growled.

"You missed two," I said. "I'm also collecting the Office of Professional Responsibility—though that one's a wash since I'm not hiring any of the people who worked there. I also convinced Arthur Weasley to come work for me, and told him he could bring one or two other people with him if he wanted them."

"Harry," Kingsley said. "You can't just do that."

"OPR is a joke," I said. "If you want I'll put Lucius Malfoy on a witness stand and he can testify to it. The fact that Umbridge was allowed to send dementors to kill me, and then didn't receive so much as a slap on the wrist even after Fudge was gone was proof of that!

"You want me to conduct investigations with foreign countries, all the non-human magical beings in this one, hunt down no less than nine death eaters including three of Voldemort's inner circle, track down Voldemort's other allies, investigate and arrest collaborators, police the Ministry—since nobody else has—for the first time in, what, a decade? More? With less than thirty people?

"Kingsley, I can't do it. Moody couldn't have done. Maybe Albus Dumbledore could have, but even Ludo Bagman would hesitate to put money on it and in any case he's dead."

"I told you he's a bad choice," Hammers said as though I wasn't even in the room. "No sense of proportion or priority."

"I need to hunt down the Death Eaters," I said. "To do that I need to work with the Goblins because that can allow me to track, and maybe even cut off, their source of funds. I need to be able to work with foreign governments in case they get the bright idea of leaving the country. If you expect me to arrest and prosecute any of them without looking just like Fudge the corruption has to be cut out of the Ministry and Wizengamot."

"Ultimately the conditions that allowed him to gain power, and the ones that drove the werewolves and giants and the like to him as allies, need to be addressed. But you'll need to find someone else to do that."

"Given it some thought, have you?" Kingsley asked dryly.

"Enough to realize it might be easier for me to just burn the whole thing down and hiring someone to build a new one," I said. "Oh, and the dementors have to go. If I have to I won't arrest anyone until they're gone."

"The dementors are the best of prison wardens," Hammers said.

"Oh yes, they never let a prisoner escape because they eat their souls first," I said.

Kingsley sighed. "I know you have had some bad experiences with dementors—"

"Bad experiences?" I asked. "Kingsley, I've despised the things ever since the beginning of my third year when I found out I could relive my parents' deaths every time one came near me. I really don't want to know what I'll experience now."

I knew what I'd experience, but I had no intention of telling them that.

"Fudge put them around Hogwarts because Sirius Black, who'd spent twelve years surrounded by them for a crime he was both innocent of and never convicted of committing, had escaped from your 'escape-proof' prison. They attacked us once on the train. They attacked a Hogwarts Quidditch game and the only reason that nobody lost their soul was because Albus Dumbledore was there. And at the end of the year they attacked me, two of my closest friends, and two Hogwarts professors on the grounds. I'll ignore the attack on myself, but those same 'best of prison wardens' of yours, Director Hammers, let some of Voldemort's greatest allies to escape from Azkaban because he asked them to!"

Hammers and Shacklebolt traded looks.

"You have a point, Harry," Shacklebolt said. "But even if we do get rid of them, it'll simply be yet another drain on manpower to set up guards."

"Maybe," I said. "But am I the only person who sees something inherently wrong with putting creatures with a 5 'X' dark rating to guard the darkest wizards and witches our society has produced?"

"And I supposed you have a solution, you seem to have one for everything else," Hammers said.

"That would be your job, actually, Director," I said.

There was a muffled thud somewhere below us and the office shook.

"What was that?" Hammers demanded.

"The heliopaths getting loose," I said. "Either that or someone just blew up the Magic is Might statue." I pulled out my watch and checked the time. "A little late, but acceptable."

"What did you do?" Shacklebolt asked.

"I, er, might have told Travers to have someone blow it up," I said. "I meant it as an example, but he, uh, might have taken it a bit literally." Screw them being late, I just hope someone has a memory they won't mind me watching.

"You told him to have someone blow up the Atrium statue," Hammers said.

"It was sick, disgusting, and in poor artistic taste," I said.

"What do you know about artistic taste?"

"I know that if I have the urge to vomit when I see it it's in poor taste," I said.

"Yes but...you destroyed Ministry property!"

Property, Merlin's beard. "I need some parchment."

Kingsley gave me a really odd look, but he found some parchment, and donated a quill and pot of ink to it.

Travers,

I've thought of a couple of possible locations for Death Eaters.

Malfoy Manor. Was Voldemort's base of operations for most of last year.

Severus Snape's residence at Spinner's End. Contact Narcissa Malfoy for detailed location, but some Death Eaters including Bellatrix Lestrange know where it is, and with Severus' death as one of Voldemort's allies, may consider it a safe place. Wait for me before going, I know how to disable Severus' wards.

Gaunt Cottage and Riddle Manor. Both in Little Hangleton, Voldemort's mother was one of the last Guants, and his father was named Tom Riddle. He was living in the Riddle House for most of a year before his return to full power, and the resurrection was done in a cemetery near by. Be careful, he hid one of his Horcruxes in the cottage, and cost Dumbledore an arm and would have killed him only a few months more (if that) if he hadn't been killed.

Malfoy's can be found in Head Boy/Girl Slytherin suite. Take Lucius and Draco to Malfoy Manor, also call and invite Arthur Weasley. Make sure Arthur knows conditions of Malfoys' continued freedom, and ask him not to antagonize them.

Harry

I suddenly remembered a little illicit Pensive-diving in my fourth year and remember just what part of the Ministry Augustus Rookwood had worked in. The Department of Mysteries, where they did...well, who knows what they did except that they have a room filled with time-turners, another full of prophecies, and one with an arch that killed things that went through it.

Hermione had taught me the advantages of having some knowledge of what you were facing, unfortunately she probably didn't have any more clue than I did about what really went on in the Department of Mysteries. Luckily though, I had underlings who could do that for me.

PS. Contact Department of Mysteries. A. Rookwood used to work for them. I want to know what he worked on, and any training he may have had. It might be useful when he find him. We may need to know just to be able to find him, and he might lead us to others.

And there had been that little conversation with Constance Hammers this morning. I had fully intended to ask Hermione to check to make sure the bodies weren't tracked, but I had forgotten to ask when I saw her. Could I trust Hammers not to do it after my little outburst earlier today?

Sure I could. As the muggle said: 'Trust, but verify'. I was perfectly capable of trusting her, really, but I wasn't about to not verify. And then there was that annoying little fact that even though I was capable of trusting her, I didn't, not really. Not yet.

PPS, Bodies of fallen at battle last night to be released today. C. Hammers wants to place tracking charms on bodies to see who claims them and who attends funerals. While I can see where this may be useful, it shows a callous lack of respect, and will engender ill-feelings in a portion of the population that we should be trying to integrate. I feel these reactions are both counter-productive to our goals, and offset what minimal rewards we could get by doing so. I have explained this, but I would appreciate it if you could find someone to make sure that the bodies are clean of tracking spells.

There, that should do nicely. Sharing a tent with Hermione for ten and a half months will do wonders for anyone's vocabulary.

I folded it into a paper crane, put a spell on it that would reduce it to ash if anyone but Travers touched it, and sent it on its way.

"What was that?" Kingsley asked.

"Ideas on possible hide-outs," I said as the door popped open and the parchment crane swept out of the room.

"Where'd you learn to make...whatever that was?" Hammers asked.

"It was a crane," I said. "I spent most of the last year living in a small tent with very little to do when I wasn't trying to end Voldemort's existence. Anything that kept boredom at bay was a plus."

"Now, are you going to let me do my job, or not?"

Hammer's scowled, "You still can't go around reassigning people to work for you and destroying Ministry property because you think it's in poor taste." Her expression cracked slightly, "even if I agree with you on the last point."

"To be honest, I asked if there was anyone else that Travers could think of recruiting and he didn't come up with anyone. I might, no, I probably will need a lawyer or something, someone who's an expert in law, and also maybe an accountant to help conduct financial investigations, but those are probably in the future."

"How about bringing in new Aurors?" Shacklebolt asked.

"I've already started, I'll be inviting a few people with special skills, a Cursebreaker, maybe a Healer or Medi-wizard or witch, along with some just out of school. For those people we're setting up a testing program to identify their strongest abilities—fighting, surveillance, investigation, and the like—training up to standard in those areas, and assigning them to field work. Once we have numbers up we'll start worrying about cross-training into the broad-field agents that is expected of Aurors, including their Chief."

Kingsley nodded in approval.

"We're setting up a list of spells and techniques and such that can be taught, and looking to hire Masters in those fields to teach them rather than pull out an active-duty Auror to do it. And only once they're learned the spells and what-not have an Auror teach them how to actually use them in the field."

Kingsley was smiling, and even Hammers was looking a little impressed.

"You're looking to restart the Academy."

"You know how understrength the Auror office was because of Fudge," I reminded him. "I don't intend to fill us up to the levels that were allowed when Grindlewald was the Dark Lord to beat, but I am going to exceed those stated as the minimum levels. I also expect that a lot of the people I hire are going to only be in for a couple of

years. People who want to help rebuild or make a difference before returning to a more 'normal' life."

Ron wanted to play (or coach) Quidditch professionally. Hermione had agreed to become an Auror but clearly wasn't planning on remaining one for long. Neville would accept, but he wanted to either run his own greenhouse or teach Herbology. Katie had her Quidditch career, would she put it off? Maybe, but it'd cost her the best years of a career and the lack of practice would hurt her game, and that assumed she wasn't injured and left unable to play professionally. George had his and Fred's shop. Could I ask him knowing what it'd do to his business?

"Understandable," Kingsley said.

"Merlin," Hammers whispered softly, a vaguely horrified look on her face. "You really intend to do it, don't you? To run the entire Auror office by yourself."

Hardly by myself.

"What did you think I was going to do?" I asked. "Sit in my desk and play solitaire all day?"

"But you're just a kid without any training or even real experience! The only reason I agreed to this was because Shack told me that you could be—" she stopped abruptly as Kingsley glared at her.

"I could be...what?" I asked Kingsley. I pushed myself to my feet and cut him off before he could reply. "You know what? I don't want to know. I'm sure you had your reasons. They might even have been good ones. But right now I do not fucking care. I don't care why you hired me. I don't care why you, Hammers, if you thought I was such a terrible person for the job, allowed him to do it and dropped off those reports this morning.

"I only care about three things. I care about whether or not you'll let me have the personnel I need to do my job. Whether or not you'll give me the funding to do my job. And whether or not I'll have your fucking support when I need it."

I stalked to the door and found it on the first try. I stalked out of Kingsley's office and slammed it shut behind me. That was fun; it's

amazing how cathartic a little door-slamming is. It made me want to open it so that I could slam it again.

Kingsley's secretary—a blond witch I vaguely remembered seeing at the Yule Ball—was watching me warily.

"Don't worry, your boss still had most of his pieces when I left," I told her. I walked to her door and let myself out, indulging in a little fun the Dursleys had denied me by slamming that one behind me for good measure.



## Chapter 4: Veteran of the Psychic Wars

You ask me why I'm weary,

Why I can't speak to you.

You blame me for my silence,

Say it's time I changed and grew.

But the war's still going on dear,

And there's no end that I know,

And I can't say if we're ever...

I can't say if we're ever gonna be free

-Blue Öyster Cult-

The main Auror office was filled with people. Some were pulling on expensive dueling robes or wearing dragon-hide vests, a few had a complete set of Fred and George's shield-wear, but most were wearing the scarlet robes. I mentally added matching uniforms to the list of things we were going to need. At the minimum I wanted everyone in shield-wear, and maybe dragon-hide for the Hit-Wizards (or whatever we ended up calling them). In any case they would not be scarlet. It might be useful for telling at a glance who was on your side—assuming, of course, that your enemies didn't change their robes to match—but it was also a convenient aiming point.

I slipped through the crowded walkways between cubicles to an open door on the far side of the room as I contemplated the basilisk hide that had been down in the Chamber of Secrets for years.

Inside the room was bigger than it appeared, though it was still cramped. A large table held a map of the Isles, but as I watched it was replaced by three smaller maps, one each for the Malfoy Manor, Spinner's End, and a somewhat larger one that showed both the Riddle Manor and the Gaunt Cottage. Percy stood by a blackboard writing names into four columns, each topped by one of the targets. The three Malfoys stood clustered in one corner while Travers and Savage—the later wearing scarlet robes instead of what he'd on

earlier—and three other Aurors stood around the table. In the corner opposite the Malfoys were Arthur Weasley and two other people that I assumed were investigators from his office.

"Potter, glad you felt like joining us," Travers said.

I ignored him as I examined the maps.

"Mrs. Malfoy gave us the precise location of Snape's house," Savage said. "And we know where these two are. I have been assured that the map of Malfoy Manor is complete; however, Lucius' information on the Riddle Manor is lacking, we have nothing at all past the first room of Snape's, and we can't find any reports on the Gaunts in the archives—though Watson insists that a couple of them did time in Azkaban back in the twenties, thirties, and early forties."

"They did," I said absently. "Marvolo and Morfin. Voldemort must have had those reports destroyed."

"Must you say his name?" someone asked.

"He's dead, for good, I killed him, I was never scared of him, why shouldn't I say it?" I demanded.

I jabbed Severus' house angrily with my wand. I didn't need to look to know that the Malfoys eyes were tracking it the way a hawk would track a transformed Peter Pettigrew. The little house expanded to show a front room with a pair of doors, with question marks behind each.

"Entrance here," I began, jabbing the map with my wand, "opens to sitting room lined with bookcases. This door leads to a kitchen. Door here has a bookcase hung on it—don't miss it—goes up to second floor. Two rooms, bedroom here, Master there. Trapdoor here in sitting room leads to potion lab. The lab was not part of the original construction, but added later. Three layers of wards, one set on the property as a whole, a second on the building itself, one additional set each on the trapdoor and master bed. I can get us past the wards, but I'll need to stop by Hogwarts for something first."

Another jab made Severus' house shrink and brought up the Gaunt cottage with a big question mark on it. "I don't have a clue about warding here; the dead snake on front door might be part of it and

may be receptive to a parslemouth." Of which there was only one living anywhere in the United Kingdom as far as I knew. "Main room—combination sitting room and kitchen. Two doors on far wall from entrance here and here, lead to master bedroom and a second bedroom, utility, or storage room.

"Riddle Manor, family graveyard here is where Voldemort staged his rebirth. Groundskeeper's cottage here, Frank Bryce, muggle, killed by Voldemort, to the best of my knowledge not currently inhabited, but it might have been used as housing for Death Eaters or allies."

Portions of the Riddle House were revealed. Others only had dark gray blanks with large question marks on them. I filled in the few things that I remembered that hadn't been already filled.

I paused and considered it.

"You think of something?" Travers asked.

I nodded, "Maybe. I think muggles require that all building plans be listed somewhere, some type of safety or security thing." Vernon had talked about them often enough whenever Grunnings was expanding and he'd used them as an excuse once when Dudley demanded they put an addition on so he could have an indoor pool. I never quite figured out where Dudley envisioned putting it.

"And if they do, then they would have complete plans of this house," Travers finished. "At least as it was before it was taken over by You-Know-Who."

"I doubt Voldemort was much into interior decorating if that stupid statue in the Atrium was anything to go by," I said, giving the man a disgusted look. Was it really so hard to say a name? "It's been dealt with, I take it?"

Travers smirked slightly, "We were running late so we ended up having to blow it up. We got pictures though."

"Excellent," I said. I turned to Arthur, "Do you know where you can get those plans?"

He frowned, then shook his head. "I never realized they had something like that. Don't really understand why they would."

"They don't have magic to make sure every building isn't going to collapse on them," I pointed out. "Hermione will probably know where to look. If nothing else ask the local police for directions. Is she still at your place?"

"That Granger girl you recruited?" Travers asked. "I asked her to go to Hogwarts to take care of that little problem you asked me about."

I suppose I could make some statement about great minds thinking alike, but more probably it was him complying with my request without finding an already working Auror to do it.

"Fine, we can go together." I turned back to Travers, "How much of a delay are those plans worth?"

"You think the Riddle House and Malfoy Manor are the most likely places that they'll be hiding?" he asked.

"Of the four I listed? Yes," I said. "Bellatrix Lestrange knew the location of Severus' place and may have had the access to at least the general residence wards. Maybe. The Riddle House and Malfoy Manor were both in use as his private headquarters. Given the personal value of the Gaunt Cottage to him as a hiding place for a Horcrux—"

There were gasps from some of the people present, silence from most. Probably, given the few people that I'd told them about to, they'd never heard of it.

"He used a horcrux?" someone asked.

"Sooner or later I'll get around to telling the full and complete story," I said. "Right now is not that time. Yes, he used a horcrux. It was hidden in the Gaunt Cottage, it cost Albus Dumbledore his arm to retrieve and he still suffered from a progressive curse. He only had a month or two left when he was killed.

"He may have used it as a repository for other Dark artifacts. Given the strength of the wards on it, and the fact that it's abandoned, one of his followers might be using it as a hidey hole."

"Grand," Travers muttered. He gesture at Arthur. "You have one hour."

Arthur nodded.

"How are we set for defensive garments?" I asked.

"The Hit-wizards all have dragon-hide. So do some of the Aurors. Some of the rest have the Weasley Wizard Wheezes line of protective wear, but the Ministry bought most of the ones they had, including the entire first run, and those mostly ended up in the hands of the Snatchers or Death Eaters last year."

He tapped the Gaunt Cottage. "You said something about hiring a Cursebreaker?"

"I haven't gotten word back yet. I'll give him a fire-call while I'm at Hogwarts and see if I can get him to agree to a contract for this job if he still hasn't made a decision to join permanently."

"Good Cursebreakers are expensive," Travers warned.

"You worry about catching the bad guys, let Percy and me worry about getting the funds from Shackbolt. Oh, Percy, make a note. I want new uniforms made up, contracted out to Weasley Wizard Wheezes, all their latest protective line, maybe with a dragon-hide vest or something. Come up with a survey asking people what they want as far as style and colors and stuff. Plus a stock of dragon-hide armor, or something similar, for when we go on raids or have to make a serious arrest."

"All new uniforms?" Savage asked with some dismay.

Travers frowned, "Uniforms, except for the first three issued when they complete training, traditionally come out of an Auror's pay."

I frowned at him and added, "Have it charged to the department, or maybe the Minister's office."

"Yes sir," Percy said.

I winced. 'Sir'. I had another new title. Joy.

"What's up with the scarlet robes?" I asked. "Some kind of office dress-robos for important occasions?"

Travers nodded, "It serves as a symbol to the public, let's them know when we're actively chasing someone, and it allows us to identify ourselves easily."

All of which were negated by this little thing called magic. Scarlet robes were fine and all, if you wanted to paint a bright 'curse-me' target on yourself; but a little charm or two and the bad guys could look the same as us.

That didn't mean that having a uniform was pointless though. Travers' first points were actually pretty good, and as long as it was a surprise the last actually held true as well. The 'hex-me' color scheme had to go, though.

"Percy, I want something dark for the new uniforms; not black, too much of that already, maybe a dark green or something."

"Green?" Savage asked. "We're going to look like bloody Healers!"

"Only if you get cursed," I muttered, then added more loudly. "Dark green." I turned to Percy and added: "We can discuss details later."

"Shacklebolt is going to have a fit," Travers muttered.

I shook my head, "He can label it a 'reconstruction bill' or something since all the money is going into shops and stuff."

"Yeah, but where's the money going to come from to buy it?" Travers asked.

"One thing at a time," I said, making a note to deal with the goblins tomorrow.

One of the Aurors I didn't know shook his head. "We should go now. If we wait they may move on before we get there."

"By now they've had plenty of time to rest up and move on," Travers said. "That's if there are any at these locations in the first place, and I'm not sure that there are given that the Malfoys jumped like rats escaping a sinking ship."

I looked over as Lucius made a small outraged sound and Draco's knuckles were white where he gripped his wand, but neither did anything.

"By now having those plans will more than offset waiting another hour." Travers turned to me, "the floo in your office is set up for travel."

Well, that was useful.

Arthur and I went to my office and, after I had permission, floored over to the Headmistress' office of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry where Minerva McGonagall welcomed us warmly with an offer of celebratory scotch. From the look of the bottle she'd done quite a bit of 'celebrating' already. Most of the portraits of the previous Headmasters and Headmistress were also sloshed, save for Phineas who wore his customary sneer, and Albus Dumbledore who looked faintly amused.

"Really, Harry, you're the man of the hour!" McGonagall said with a smile as she poured another celebration.

It was widely rumored in Hogwarts that McGonagall had been born looking stern and had never smiled in her life. The same rumors said that Filch was born grumpy and had never loved anyone but his cat (in varying degrees) in his life, and Severus was born with a sneer and simply hated everyone in his life (it was generally regarded as true that neither Filch nor Severus had smiled either).

I knew that bit about Severus hating everyone was untrue, though whether or not his obsession with my mother counted as 'love' I was trying hard not to think about. A smiling McGonagall instantly leaped to the top ten scariest-things-in-the-life-of-Harry-Potter, ranking somewhere above dementors but below Umbridge in her kitty-plate-infested, eye-blistering-pink-painted office.

"Harry, how good it is to see you are alive."

No thanks to you, I thought towards the painting of Albus. Instead I said, "I have work, Professor," and passed on the drinks for both myself and Arthur. "You and I are going to have a long talk, Old Man," I added over my shoulder as I reached the door of the office.

The entrance to the Headmaster's office is on the seventh floor. Most of the corridors seemed to be filled with a running battle of Dr. Filibuster's No-Heat Wet-Start Fireworks and Weasley's Wild-Fire Whiz-Bangs. The Whiz-Bangs, aided by Decoy Detonators, seemed to be winning—at least based on which could be louder. That wasn't true of everywhere, of course. Someone had taken a page out of Neville's potion book as there were a series of exploding cauldrons on the fifth floor, and much of the second had been turned into a salt-marsh.

Things were calmer on the ground floor with families arriving for the remains of loved ones, or at least relatives, although the party in the Great Hall had seemed to recover from the lull it had been in when I escaped last night...earlier this morning. In fact the most interesting thing on the floor was when a squad of Armor paraded through, plates freshly polished to a mirror shine but still showing the scars of battle.

We found Ron and Hermione in the set of rooms in the first floor dungeons that had been set up by Lee and the MIB as a morgue, helping two wizards and a witch from the Ministry.

"Hey, mate," Ron said, coming over. "How are you?"

I looked at him and he winced.

"Stupid question?"

"Pretty much," I said. "Can you make sure no one slips tracking charms on..." I nodded towards the sheet-covered bodies on the stone-slab tables.

"The bodies?" Ron finished. "Yeah, I can do that. Hermione insisted I help her after that Travers fellow ordered us to come here. Who does he think he is anyway?"

"Your boss," I said. "Thing is, he's right."

Ron scowled.



"We're..." I shook my head. "Do you know there's less than thirty Aurors on their feet? That there were fewer Aurors, before this started, than the required minimum they were supposed to have?"

"I knew it was bad," Ron said, whistling softly. "That Fudge wasn't giving them funding that they wanted. But I didn't know it was anything like that."

"I told him to find someone," I said. "He picked the best people available."

"The ones available that weren't doing anything and weren't trained for anything more serious," Ron said.

Never let it be said that Ron is stupid, denser than lead sometimes, but not stupid.

"What's Dad need Hermione for?"

"We need to find where muggles have plans for a building that we're going to raid."

"Raid? When, where?" Ron asked. "Do you want me to get Neville and the rest of the DA that—" he stopped abruptly, but I heard the words anyway.

'...that isn't in here.' Of the twenty nine people who had signed the parchment, twenty nine friends who I had taught, seven had come through needing only minimal healing or none at all. For ten, more than a third, of them it hadn't been enough. Another eight were, or should be, in the hospital. One had been too young to participate in the battle, one had fled rather than fight, and one had turned us in to Fudge and Umbridge.

And Justin Finch-Fletchley was missing/unaccounted for.

"No," I said. "I want, no, I need you to do this job."

Ron stared at me for a moment, then slowly nodded. "Okay, Harry. If it's what you need." A year ago he would have insisted on coming with.

Yeah, of all of us Ron had grown up the most.

I went to Severus' quarters and fire-called the Burrow.

A depressed Molly Weasley answered. George was apparently moping upstairs, Charlie was out banishing gnomes as hard as he could, and Bill had gone back to the Shell Cottage to pack things since he and Fleur were planning on moving in to 'help around the house'.

I didn't respond except to nod and make polite sounds. I wasn't sure how to take the news about Bill and Fleur moving back to the Burrow, the last I remembered Molly and Fleur had not gotten along.

Ten minutes later I fire-called the Shell Cottage and found Bill packing robes into trunks while Fleur charmed blackout curtains across the windows.

"Harry," Bill said when I popped my head into his fireplace. "What's wrong?"

"Better to ask me what's right, it'll take less time," I said.

"Look," Bill said, "Harry, if this is about the job offer, I, we need more time."

"Sure, no problem," I said. "As I said, take as much as you want. However, there is a raid we're conducting in about forty minutes. I'd really like to sign you as an outside contractor for it."

"Where and how much?" Bill asked instantly.

I explained briefly and added that it probably wouldn't be Malfoy's or Severus' places. "As for how much, I trust you to quote me a reasonable price."

"Twelve hundred galleons."

"That much?" I asked.

"Darkest Dark Lord in a long time, unknown warding scheme, short notice..."

"Okay, okay, done," I said before he could tick off another point. "Go to the visitor's entrance, when asked your reason for visiting tell them: 'Special Contractor to the Auror's Office'."

I pulled my head out of the fire before Bill could ask for more money or something equally underhanded. Severus' extensive supply of potions yielded a couple of healing potions, a blood replenisher, a post-cruciatu's potion, a small stock of veritaserum, and a vial labeled: Longbottom cauldron #37, 25m safe distance, smoke inhalation produces gills and a purple rash.

Cursebreaker recruited and stocked with supplies I left and started to head back up to McGonagall's office.

I was crossing the Entrance Hall towards the main stairs when I heard a voice behind me calling for me to wait up.

I turned to find Neville hurrying across the hall towards me. He'd broken an ankle in the battle, but that would have been a simple fix for Madam Pomfrey, now there was no sign he'd ever been injured.

He stopped before me and looked me over. "Is it true, then?"

"Is what true?" I asked.

He held out the Daily Prophet. There, on the front page, was a big picture of me under the headline: MINISTER SHACKLEBOLT NAMES HARRY POTTER YOUNGEST-EVER CHIEF AUROR.

"Without reading the article, yeah, it looks pretty true," I said.

"I want in."

"In?"

Neville rolled his eyes, "Look. Minister Shacklebolt has waved the N.E.W.T. requirements for anyone who participated at last night's battle. I know you already recruited Hermione and Ron. I want in."

I considered that, shouldn't it have been my decision what requirements were waved? I shrugged the question away; it didn't matter since I was planning on doing the same thing anyway. "I thought you wanted to teach Herbology or start your own

greenhouse?"

"Professor Sprout isn't ready to move on yet," Neville said. "Besides, I still have a lot to learn before I'm ready to teach. As for the greenhouse, that takes a lot of time to start up. I want to help with this. We all do, or at least most of us do."

"Okay," I said. "Talk to those that were there last night. Find out who wants in and who doesn't." A thought came to me, "How's Lavender?"

"Conscious, but depressed," Neville said. "Madam Pomfrey says her chances of ever walking again are about even."

I frowned, "She can't walk?"

"Spine injury, she's paralyzed from about her waist down, mostly."

"Mostly?"

Neville shrugged, "I'm not a healer. I know it wasn't a clean break and that she can feel part of her left thigh. Madam Pomfrey is cautiously optimistic, but she isn't an expert in that kind of injury and St. Mungo's is full. Right now they've done everything they can to help her and she can be released but..." he shrugged.

I nodded, "Okay, I want you to tell George that I need him in his and Fred's shop more than we need another Auror. Anything he can come up with that helps us do our job is a plus. Suggest to...Lee and maybe Angelina that he needs the help?"

Neville nodded. "Weasley Wizard Wheazes becomes an Auror supply source?"

"No," I said, shaking my head. "I liked what they were doing, both jokes and a more serious line of items. I'd prefer they continue along that line, or maybe set up a second store or maybe just set up a different company run out the same store. I'll talk it over with George, the stuff is useful, but I don't want him to give up on his and Fred's dream because there are a couple of people out there intent on making my—our lives miserable."

"Okay, what about Lavender and anyone else too injured to become an Auror?"

"I don't know," I said. "Honestly, I thought everyone who hadn't already been released was going to be in the hospital a lot longer. As for Lavender, do you know if she was still thinking about opening her own clothing shop?"

"I don't think that's what she'd call it," Neville said wryly, but then shook his head. "I don't know what she wants to do now that..." he shrugged.

"I know," I said. "Um, maybe when you talk to George, ask him about hiring her to expand their Wonder Witch line. I want to hire them to do a full set of uniforms and things, approach Lavender about design."

"Good idea," Neville said. "I can suggest she puts some sketches together, both everyday robes as well as dress ones. Do you have any suggestions you want me to pass on if she's interested?"

"We talked about it earlier in the office," I said. "The only real color options in the Wizarding world seem to be eye-catching or black. I was thinking a dark color, like a dark green or something, with a brighter color like gold or Gryffindor scarlet for trim. Percy is supposed to put together a survey to ask the Aurors what they'd like."

"Okay, I'll tell her," Neville promised and turned to head towards the hospital wing. He'd come along way from the chubby boy who blew up the feather he was supposed to be levitating. His taking charge of the DA while I was on my camping trip across the UK and leading Hogwarts' own resistance cell only proved that.

"Oh, and Neville?" I asked.

He paused and looked back at me.

"Alicia has a spot as one of England's Reserve Chasers," I reminded him.

"We could really use a win," he said before walking away.

McGonagall was still in her office when I arrived.

"The party is picking up again," I said, declining another celebratory whisky.

"Given all that has happened in the past year I'm loath to break up the festive spirit that reigns in the halls. Since the Ministry is cleaning the grounds and seeing to the...remains, as well as repairing any damage incurred in the fighting I haven't needed the rest of the staff's help to do so, so they can keep things from getting out of hand."

From what I remembered of Flitwick the night before I wondered if that was really true, but didn't say anything.

"Furthermore," McGonagall went on, "I am short of instructors for Muggle Studies, Potions, and Defense Against the Dark Arts. I'd hoped that Professor Slughorn would remain but he has decided not, and the Ministry has hired the person I'd hoped to hire for the Defense job."

"Sorry," I said. I kind of was, I'd really enjoyed teaching the DA and the scores on NEWTs and OWLs suggested I was good at it.

"Don't be, I am sure you will make a fine Auror," McGonagall said. "I said you would, if you remember?"

"I do," I said. "Actually, that's why I'm here."

"Oh?" she asked.

"I need Severus' wand," I said.

McGonagall raised an eyebrow, but opened a drawer in her desk and pulled out a wand box. "Are you aware that he left everything to you, save a few bequests?"

"No," I said, but it wasn't exactly a surprise. Once it would have been, not now. I picked up the wand box and opened it. Nestled in the green velvet was a dragon heartstring-cored ebony wand, nine inches long.

Wordlessly McGonagall handed me a spare sheath for it.

I was running out of places to stick wands. I had both the Elder Wand and Voldemort's in a double holster in my left sleeve. I wasn't about to trust any of them to my pockets, and an ankle holster was just too tricky to reach in a hurry unless you were already on the ground. On the other hand, Severus' didn't fit me nearly as well as Voldemort's and the Elder Wand. In the end I simply charmed the wand holster to stick and put it between my shoulder blades.

Cubicles had been shrunk or charmed aside when I arrived back at the Aurors office. Domesday nodded a greeting, but all I got from the rest were polite stares. Given how often people stare at me because of my scar, or because of Quidditch, or because of something the Prophet has written, it was actually a relief.

The crowd in the Map Room had thinned somewhat. Travers, Savage, Watson, and two others I didn't know hovered over the map table while Constance Hammers and another wizard looked on.

"Well?" Travers asked without looking up.

"Cursebreaker is on his way," I said.

"Fine," Travers said. "Four objectives, Maple, Green, Sugar, and Reindeer, first letters coincide with name of target." He waved to the two men I didn't know. "These are Maximilian Bates and Alistair Huff, late of the Hit Wizards. Bates will be leading the raid on Sugar. Huff the one on the Reindeer. Savage will lead the one to Maple, and Watson the one on the Green. I will remain here to coordinate."

"That's fine," I said.

"We split the Hit-wizards into four-person teams, one each to Maple, Sugar, and Reindeer. In addition, Arthur Weasley's squad, the two Malfoys, and eight Aurors will hit Maple. Six Aurors will hit Green. Auror Tonks will accompany you to Sugar, and eleven Aurors will accompany the Cursebreaker to Reindeer.

"I will be in overall charge, Director Hammers will observe, Percy Weasley will help coordination. LEPrecon has agreed to function as our reserve. Sean Miller, here, has an eight-person team and will function as our reserve."

I nodded to the wizard next to Hammers and he nodded back to me as Bates charmed Spinner's End into prominence. "Attach your badge to the front of your robes. Taping it with your wand activates a communication spell. Name the person you want to speak to and the connection will open. Naming an objective will put you in contact with that team leader, 'Reserve' will contact Miller, and 'Control' will contact here."

There was a commotion out in the squad room and Bill Weasley entered. He crossed to me and slammed a silver badge down on the table. "Very funny," he said.

I picked up the badge and chuckled. It said 'Mercenary'. "It's better than what Percy got this morning when we came in."

Bill frowned. "Oh?"

Percy gave me a disgusted look, but I ignored him. "It said 'Lackey'."

Bill snickered.

"As much fun as this is," Travers began.

"Travers, meet Bill Weasley. Huff, your Cursebreaker."

The portkey dropped us (literally in the case of Tonks and me) on the bank of a river. The water was grey, torpid, and greasy-looking. Rainbow hues from spilled oil shimmered along its surface and it was filled with everything from floating fast food cups to a decidedly not floating refrigerator that had to be at least forty years old. The bank wasn't much better. Here and there bits of scraggly brown grass poked up, but most of it was covered in weeds and the trash that hadn't made it into the river.

"Pleasant place, this," one of the hit-wizards said.

Bates grunted, and we set off down a narrow alley.

The plan was simple enough. I'd get them in the front door, Bates and his partner would secure the first room, and then the other two would rush in and secure the far room. Tonks and I would open the trap door and the second pair would check out the potion lab/basement while Bates went upstairs, where we would go and



open the master bedroom. I'd thought it would be better for everyone to go in, but Bates had said that in the small rooms more people would hinder each other.

Bates pulled us up two blocks short of Spinner's End.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Outer sneakoscope threshold," Bates said, examining the house through a pair of omnioculars. "Potter, how close do you need to be to get us through the outer wards?"

Good question. Severus was paranoid and with good reason, but he had also recognized that he might not be around. In the end if you knew something about him that extremely few people did, you had access to most things. If you happened to have his wand you had access to the rest.

I pulled out his wand and considered his memories of my mother. Obsession, love, whatever, wasn't what he'd use to ward this door, and I discarded his later memories out of hand. I needed something earlier that he'd associated with this place. I settled for an early memory when he realized he had a friend for the first time in his life and tapped my head with his wand.

There was a wave of cool, unfriendly magic. The Burrow had always had a nurturing feel to it. Hogwarts was always welcoming. Severus' house was cold and distant, with a little casual cruelty thrown in for good measure.

"I'm in," I said.

"Good, now us."

"Oh," Tonks said with a slight shiver as he allowed her into the wards. "That's unpleasant."

"Access through the outer wards," I said as I tapped the others. "I can temporarily lower the threshold wards from here, but I can't grant full access from outside of the wards." I concentrated on the wards themselves for a moment and answers whispered in the back of my mind like a disturbing blend between speaking parslemouth and legilimancy. "I can activate anti-portkey and apparation wards."

"That's fine," Bates said. "When I give the signal you put those up and we'll make a sprint for it, three-count intervals, drop the threshold wards while we're running. Potter, Tonks you come last. MacGuinness, I'll blast the door down and we'll go right through. We can fix it easy enough later if nothing comes of this."

He put the omnioculars away and drew his wand, and the others did the same. I put away Severus' wand and drew my own.

Bates tapped his badge. "Control, Sugar, in position."

"Understood, hold position," Travers' voice came back through the badge.

"We're waiting?" I asked.

"Coordination," Tonks explained. "We want to hit all four places simultaneously."

"All teams in position," Travers voice said over Bates' badge. "Final check, go/no go."

Bates held out a fist, thumb up. The other hit-wizards did the same.

"Tonks, go," Tonks said.

"Go," I added.

"Green, go."

Bates tapped his badge. "Sugar, go."

"Reserve, go."

A pause, "Reindeer, go."

There was a longer pause before Savage growled, "Maple, go."

"Control, go," Travers finished. "All teams...execute."

Bates took off running, another hit-wizard right behind him.

"Wards," Tonks hissed at me, but I was already working.

I'd gotten pretty good at putting up wards around the tent quickly, but emplacing (or taking down) wards was different from activating a set of wards that were already in place. For one thing there was less wand-waving and muttering involved, which made it easier. On the other hand it meant having to think at least partially like the person they were constructed to be controlled by, and while Severus had made provisions for others to control them if he couldn't he hadn't intended for that to ever happen. As much as I understood the man now, as much as I respected and even admired him, thinking like him was never something I had succeeded at.

There are days when it would have been very useful if I'd let the Hat put me in Slytherin.

I felt the wards finally snap into place and the ones on the door drop, to find Tonks tugging at my sleeve. The second pair of hit-wizards was almost to the house and we were late.

By the time we'd gotten to the house Bates and MacGuinness were already upstairs and the other two were waiting impatiently by the trap door. The front door had been blasted in, and the explosion had clipped the bookcases to either side of it, spilling black and brown leather bound books all over the floor. A weird glittering dust hung in the air, giving off a soft sent of cinnamon.

The combination of Severus' wand pressed against the iron ring that was used to open the trapdoor and my mother's name undid the lock, and Tonks pushed me towards the door that led upstairs. It had been knocked off its hinges and lay askew on against a bookcase, the tomes that had been on the shelf attached to it were scattered in with the others. The staircase was steep, so narrow that my shoulders brushed the walls, and the ceiling was so low that I had to stoop. Ron would never have managed it without braining himself.

There was a short hallway large enough for three doors. The one on the left had been broken in like the others and revealed an empty bedroom. The middle one had likewise been broken in, but what had once been a linen closet had the twisted dimensions of a magically-expanded area and had been turned into a small bathroom.

Bates and MacGuinness were pressed against the far wall from the stairs right next to the unopened door.

Another tap, another whispered word, and the magic sealing the room vanished a moment before Bates went through it.

"Clear," a voice called from downstairs.

"Clear," Bates agreed as he stepped from the room. He looked at me and nodded towards the stairs.

I turned and started to go down as Tonks backed down the stairs. About halfway down she missed a step. I managed to grab a handful of robes just in time to keep her from falling.

"Thanks," she said.

"Not a problem."

We managed to make it down without further accident.

"Anything interesting in the basement?" Bates asked.

"Couple of potions going," one of the hit-wizards reported. "We can get someone in later to identify them. I didn't want to do anything without knowing what he was doing."

"Did you check floo-calls?" Tonks asked. When the hit-wizard shook his head she went over to the fireplace and tapped a brick. Glowing numbers appeared to float in the air. "Last call was yesterday afternoon, it—"

A glowing green head appeared in the unlit fireplace and a black blur streaked from it to hit me in the leg before anyone could do anything to stop it.

"Harry!"

"I'm fine, Tonks," I said as the glowing head of Severus Snape gave the room a poisonous look.

"What was that?" Bates asked.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the cat that I had left in my office in its wastebasket-den that was charmed so it couldn't get out. "Cat," I said.

"How did it get here?" he demanded.

I shrugged. "Magic?" I asked. Before he could reply I crossed to the fireplace and shoved my wand through the floating, green, spectral head of Severus Snape.

He sneered. "The password is something I am not."

"You can check his messages later," Bates growled, tapping his badge. "Control, Sugar is clear. No sign of recent habitation."

"Understood, Sugar. Lock the place down and shift to Green."

"The Gaunt Cottage?" I asked. "Why?"

Bates shrugged, "We'll know when we get there."

They didn't bother to pick up the scattered books, or repair the damaged interior doors, though MacGuinness did repair and magically lock the outer door. I left the portkey and apparation wards up and we all moved to where we could disappearate.

The Gaunt Cottage was just like Ogden's and Morfin's memories. Perhaps a little worse for wear, it was hard to tell, but the snake nailed to the front door looked so fresh it could have been put up an hour before.

Watson and a member of his team were waiting for us on the path.

"I sent the rest of my team to help Huff," he said as we approached.

Bates nodded. "What's the problem?"

"The ingenious set of wards on this place," Watson said. "We covered it with anti-portkey and apparition wards, and it's not hooked up to the floo, so it stands to reason no one has entered or left. But all of our attempts to gain entrance have met with failure."

"Blasting spells?"

Watson pointed to a large hole blasted in the ground. "You can try if you want, but be careful, they bounce. I'm waiting for Reindeer to finish so that I could see if that Cursebreaker Mr. Potter brought could have any success against it." He turned to me, "Unless you happen to know what, if any, passwords You-Know-Who used?"

"Call him Voldemort," I said absently as I walked up to the door. I cautiously touched it with a finger. There was so much magic running through it my skin tingled and I felt the hairs on my neck stand up. Remembering the cave where the fake locket had been hidden I pulled out a small pocketknife. It wasn't as good as the one Sirius had given me that could open most locks, but it had proven very useful to have while camping.

I carefully cut myself and smeared some blood on the door.

"You know blood magic?" Tonks asked, and I could hear the worry make her words come fast and high pitched.

"Saw this done once before to get at something he hid," I said, trying the knob. It didn't work. "So maybe he tried something else."

"Like what?" Watson asked curiously. He frowned suddenly, "that snake... Parseltongue?"

"It's what I was thinking," I said, looking at the dead snake. "Open."

The nail was two-thirds down its body so there was plenty of room for the head to twist up and look at me through dead eyes. "Who...speak...me..." it hissed.

Not what I was expecting.

"What did it say?" Tonks asked, coming up behind me.

"It was...garbled," I said. "Like it was speaking what it thought was Parseltongue, but only a few of the words were actual words."

"Maybe you just don't know them," Watson suggested.

I shook my head. "Unless I really concentrate I can't tell the difference between hearing and speaking English and hearing and

speaking Parseltongue. It's just something that I've always been able to do."

"Hmm," Watson said. "I was unaware that the Potter line had such a gift."

"It didn't, I—" I stopped abruptly as a thought occurred to me. "Albus Dumbledore thought that when Voldemort's curse rebounded on him when he tried to kill me sixteen years ago that he might have unwittingly transferred some of his powers into me."

Which is exactly what had happened, in a way. He'd made me into a Horcrux...and then he'd destroyed that piece of himself. Which begged the question, was it really destroyed? I could still speak and understand Parseltongue, though imperfectly if the snake was an indication. Did that mean that the killing curse hadn't totally destroyed the part of his soul he'd put in me?

No, no way. He was dead this time. There was a fucking body.

He had to be dead.

He had to.

I turned back to the door. One thing was certain, Voldemort had never been particularly creative with his protections. Powerful? Yes. Creative? No. "Speak to me Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts four."

The snake fell dead and the door creaked open.

Watson and his partner went in while Tonks and I stared at the small cottage.

"Shit," I whispered.

"What?" Tonks asked.

I shook my head.

"You want to keep secrets? Fine. You want to play games? That's fine to," she snapped. "But this isn't a game and I have to know that I can trust you."

I looked at her; where the hell had that come from. "Tonks?"

"Merlin, God, Powers Ancient and Arcane...we trusted you, Harry," she said. "Trusted that you knew what you were doing, trusted you to take that bastard down. We, Remus trusted you enough that he asked you to be Teddy's godfather—he told me that you'd make him safer than a safehouse under the Fidelius and half the Order could. I trusted you to do just that. Merlin, Harry, you took a half-dozen students who hadn't even all passed their O.W.L.s and fought a dozen of the worst Death Eaters to a standstill!

"Why don't you trust us too?"

"Trust you?" I asked confused. "Tonks, you're one of the few people in the Ministry that I do trust."

"You don't act like it," she snarled. "You just...show up out of nowhere after being gone almost a whole year, and suddenly you're saying that now we can fight him after, after..." she choked off whatever she was going to say. "You show up, and suddenly Snape is your best friend and you trust that worm of a cousin of mine. And just now you had a thought that made you so scared I could see it on your face, and I've never known you to be scared... I just..."

She stopped speaking and turned and stared angrily at the cottage. And if she was wondering all those things you could bet that a lot of other people were as well. And...I needed her at my back. She was the only full-fledged Auror I knew well enough to trust. Even Kingsley had ulterior motives these days.

"I told you that I don't trust Malfoy Junior," I said.

"And Snape?" she asked coldly. "I got a perfect on my bleeding Potions O.W.L. and he still refused to let me into his class. Do you know what I had to do to get him to let me in?"

I could think of a few things, none of them nice, but none of them what she had just tried to imply. There was only one woman he had ever cared about. As far as I could tell she was also the only person other than himself that he'd really cared about. Unfortunately I didn't have time to have this whole discussion, which I really didn't want to have anyway.



"Voldemort put some of his power in me when he failed to kill me as a baby," I said. "That power should have been destroyed last night."

"Because he died?" Tonks asked. "Does this mean he's not really dead?"

That was exactly what I was afraid of.

"Damnit, Harry, talk to me!"

I turned and looked at her.

"Travers assigned me as your partner; do you know what that means?"

I could think of a couple of things that that meant, but there were probably more that I didn't know. "No," I said honestly.

"It means we have to trust each other," she said tightly. "We have to be able to trust each other with our backs, with our secrets, with everything, because if we don't it means that we might not be coming home at the end of the day."

We might not be coming home at the end of the day anyway, but I wasn't going to point that out. It was a lesson we both had learned too damn well. "I do trust you, Tonks," I said slowly.

"But I don't know if I can trust you!"

How the hell was I supposed to respond to that? Fortunately for me Watson and his partner came out before I had to think of a response. "Anything?" I asked them.

Watson shook his head. "At one time, yes, spells of that magnitude leave traces that are unmistakable; but not any more. He must have returned and sealed the place in such a way that he thought that only he could get past."

"Okay," I said.

"Control to Potter."

I tapped my badge with my wand. "Go ahead."

"Maple and Reindeer report mission accomplished. Signs of recent habitation found at Riddle Manor, but it was hastily evacuated, probably only a few minutes before we arrived. We're going to be cataloging things at Malfoy Manor for a while."

"Nothing found at Green," I said. "What about the ground-keeper's cottage at the Ridd—er, Reindeer?"

There was a pause that spoke volumes.

"Control," Bates snapped. "Green and Sugar are diverting to the ground-keeper's cottage."

"What do you want done with this place?" Watson asked.

"Burn it," I said. "Burn it down."

I apparated to the Riddle House, easy enough to see since it was right across the valley that Little Hangleton sat in and perched on its own little hill. A second apparition brought me to the front door of the ground-keeper's house. I had been willing to wait there for the Hit-Wizard team that seemed content to run down the hill from the Riddle House instead of apparating. For one thing they were professionals at this. For another they were willing to actually work with me, unlike certain unnamed people in the past. However, the door was standing wide open and that, in my experience, was never a good sign.

I never had figured out how to use my patronus to send messages. On the other hand there was this neat little variation I had seen Remus do once that I had spent part of fifth year working out how to do it. Just point wand at your empty hand, whisper 'Expecto Patronum', and you instantly have a hand full of pale, silvery fire, no happy memory required.

The inside of the cottage was dark, hence the patronus-fire. Heavy curtains had been pulled in front of the windows, but the door and fire was enough to see by. I instantly wished it hadn't been. There was a small dining area off to my left, beyond it and deeper into the dwelling was what looked like a small sitting room. To my right was the kitchen.

There must have been some sort of barrier spell on the door way because the smells hit me as soon as I was across the threshold. The sickly-sweet smell of rancid vomit, the stench of voided bowels, and the smell of burnt pork almost overpowered the iron tang of blood.

The floor was black and sticky with blood. More blood was splashed across the walls and ceiling. On a clean white towel on one counter were a variety of knives and forks and things I couldn't begin to identify. There was a body on a table that dominated the center part of the kitchen. It was impossible to tell if it had been a wizard or witch (long hair, but both wizards and witches wore hair long). It was nude, but there was a red ruin between its legs that I didn't want to think about, and the chest looked like a giant had reached deep into its torso with immaterial hands that had suddenly become very material and pulled...

There were two doors, once closed and one that led to a flight of stairs going down. A flash of green light came from the one going down. Travers' voice was saying something over the badge, but I wasn't listening as I ran down the stairs three at a time, extinguishing the patronus-fire as I went.

The cottage had been positioned low on the hill on the backside of the property facing up towards the Riddle House. It made a pretty picture looking down from the house, and it effectively hid the basement-level that had been built into the side of the hill. Originally it had probably held maintenance equipment. I could see the oil and petrol stains on the concrete where a lawnmower had probably been parked; and a workbench on the far wall still held pruning shears and the like.

Whatever its original purpose had been, the Death Eaters had come up with a new one for it.

Torture.

The large garage-style door to the left had been replaced by another wall. Several circles (obviously some kind of magical cells) set into the floor lined the floor along three of the walls, while the fourth—the one with the bench—held tools. A raised platform dominated the center of the room; on it was a frame from which a man dangled,

suspended by his wrists. Judging from the miniature rack and other devices on the bench it could probably be shrunk and easily swapped for another torture implement.

Four of the cells were occupied, or had been, since the occupants were all dead—though only one looked like it had been that way for some time. The man hanging from the frame was not (judging by the weak moans) and the Death Eater next to him was very much alive.

He didn't say anything, just raised his wand and pointed at the man. "Sectumsemptra!"

He started to turn his wand towards me but I was faster, and I was angry. My disarming spell ripped the wand from his hand, and sent him crunching into the workbench. The spell had been instinctive, a reflexive response to being confronted with a spell that Severus had created and I had almost killed with. I wasn't sure why I was surprised, the wide-spread use of the Muffliato charm he had created inside the Ministry during the last year.

Two years ago I would have stopped and gone to the man. Even a year ago I probably would have done the same. I went over to the Death Eater and ripped his mask off—his wand was across the room.

Amycus Carrow and he'd never hurt anyone ever again. He'd caught the edge of the bench on the neck and snapped it cleanly.

Strange, that. The first person I ever killed on my own and it was with a spell I used because it was 'safe'. Oh, he wasn't the first person to have died because of me. It'd taken Voldemort and me to kill Quirrel, and I'd killed a part of him when I shoved that basilisk fang into his first Horcrux. Crouch Jr.? Not dead and all Fudge's fault anyway. Sirius had been at the Ministry because of me, which meant that no matter what Dumbledore said, yes, some of his death was my fault. More fault rested with him for keeping things to himself, but most rested with Bellatrix for casting the spell. Dumbledore? Again, some with me, if nothing else my being there prevented him from saving himself, but more lay with Draco, Severus, and Dumbledore for being stupid enough to put on the cursed ring that led him to plot his own demise.

As for Voldemort, he failed to understand who the true master of the Elder Wand was, and it bounced his curse back at him. There was a certain amount of irony there. Those who live by the killing curse die by their own killing curse.

But Carrow? That was all me, a holly wand, and a spell that was only supposed to disarm people.

A severing charm took care of the chains the man was dangling from. A second spell managed to catch him in mid-fall and lower him to the floor. He was dirty, hair was greasy and matted; his clothes were rags dark with blood and things I couldn't begin to identify. Probably hadn't had a bath or a good meal in months.

The spell ran from the top of his right shoulder to just under his ribs on his left side, and was already spurting blood. Severus had a complex counter-charm that he'd chanted when healing Draco, and unfortunately I didn't know it. I had, however, practiced with it extensively over the last year and had a pretty good idea of how it worked.

It was, essentially, a cutting curse that repeated itself over and over until it was out of energy. Usually this was sometime after it had cut through the equivalent of a one-foot diameter tree trunk (it was also useful for splitting wood), when I used it—Hermione and Ron both refused. Needless to say this did Bad Things for humans hit with it. Reluctant to use it or not, it was Hermione who'd come up with a way of countering it.

Basically, it boiled down to hitting the curse with the counter-spell for the cutting curse, repeat as needed. The thing was, if you put too much power behind the counter you wore out before the curse could be depleted, not enough power you didn't accomplish anything, too fast and you started making mistakes, too slow and the victim would bleed to death first.

Someone pounded down the stairs and I had my wand up as Tonks came into the room and froze.

"Stunned?" she asked, gesturing past me.

"Dead, broken neck," I said. "Wand's over there somewhere," I added with a wave as I cast another counter at the wound. "Help."

Tonks touched her badge with her wand. "Ground-keeper's cottage secure. One Death Eater dead. Six civilians found. Five dead, one seriously injured. Request Healer and emergency Portkey to St. Mungo's for spell-damage."

She knelt next to me. "What curse?"

"Sectumsempra," I said. "Acts like a cutting curse that repeats itself. Cast the cutting-curse counterspell and don't stop until I say."

"The cutting curse derives from the cutting charm, Harry," she said. "The mending charm blocks it, but it isn't a counter-spell per se and it isn't rated for human use."

Who was she, Hermione? "You're not casting it on him, you're casting it on the curse that is going to kill him if you don't," I snapped. "Point and cast, Tonks, that's an order."

She didn't smile, but she did begin casting the charm.

I took a moment to pour the blood replenishing potion in his mouth and coaxed it down his throat. A healing potion labeled 'external use only' was poured in the wound.

"Where did you get the potions?" Tonks asked between charms.

"I'm living in the quarters of one of the youngest Master Potion Brewers in history," I replied. "I raided his stores."

When I had watched Severus lift the curse on Draco I hadn't really seen anything to indicate that the spell had been broken. Maybe I had been too surprised, or maybe I had missed it in all the blood. Or maybe it was just that the spell Severus had used didn't have an indicator. Whatever the case was, I had noticed, over the repeated experimentation, that there was a small flash of colorless light when the spell broke. In daylight it was almost impossible to spot. In the dim light of the torches that lit the torture chamber it was hard to miss.

"That's it," I said, reaching for the potion vials. "Do blood replenishers have clover in them?"

"What?" she asked.

I showed her the three vials I had and the warning label on the one that sounded the most effective.

She considered, then pointed to another.

"Try healing charms, Tonks," I said, forcing him to drink the contents of the vial.

He moaned weakly and tried to sit up but I pushed him back down.

"Can't see," he rasped, his voice almost gone.

I wasn't surprised. His entire face was a mess of blood old and new, sweat, dirt, and grime. His mouth was little more than a pulpy hole, one eye was so swollen it probably couldn't open, and the other was gummed shut by blood and other things. I used my wand and gently cast Aguamenti and used the jets of water to rinse away most of the grime until the one eye was able to crack open.

"D-Dora?" he rasped.

Tonks jerked up from where she was casting healing spells and looked at the man in wild-eyed shock. "Daddy?" she whispered.

He slumped, and blood burbled at the corner of his mouth, but he kept breathing. I took another look, but aside from the general build I couldn't tell if it was Ted Tonks or not.

There was sound from upstairs and I moved to the side so I could cover the stairs, but it was Max Bates who came down followed by three more Hit Wizards.

"Death Eater?" he demanded.

I gestured. "Healer?"

"Caduceus, get down here!" Bates bellowed.

A moment later a man with a cadaverous face covered by a week or more of silvery bristles came down the stairs. He wore a dark shade of green instead of the lime that was the Healer's traditional color,

and his wand was held in a way that made it seem like he was more likely to cast a curse than a healing spell.

He didn't pay attention to Tonks as she woodenly described the healing spells she'd cast, but he did accept the three empty vials. He waved his wand over the wizard muttering spells under his breath as he did so, muttered something about 'bloody amateurs', and placed a medallion on the man's chest. A tap with his wand and both disappeared with the suddenness of a Portkey.

"Tonks?" I asked as she stared at the place the two had vanished from.

"Tonks," I repeated more sharply.

"What?" she asked, startled.

"Are you sure that was—"

"Yes," she said shortly.

"Fair enough," I said. I half-turned, "Bates!"

"Chief," he said laconically from by Carrow's body.

"Are we secure?"

He nodded, "We are at that."

"Excellent." I turned back to Tonks, "Go get your mother and go to St. Mungo's. I'll go back to the office if you don't want to take Teddy with you."

"I..." she blinked, "I should stay. Travers will—"

"Travers will do nothing," I said sharply. "Go."

She nodded and headed for the stairs.

"Are you sure that was smart, Boss?" Max asked after a moment.



"It seemed like the right thing to do," I said. I liked the sound of that. "Make a note, Max, I want that on my headstone. 'Here lies Harry Potter, he tried to do the right thing'."

I stood, my robes were cool and tacky with blood. None of it mine and at least the robes were black so it didn't show. I remember hearing once that the British Army's uniforms were traditionally red because it didn't show blood. I could happily say—through my vast experience—that that was so much dragon dung. Blood may appear scarlet, but it gets dark until it's the color of rust. The only colors that really hide it are black and dark brown.

I walked up the stairs and out into the sunlight. It was well into late afternoon, almost early evening. "Travers," I said, tapping my wand.

"Situation?" he asked briskly.

"Ground-keeper's cottage secure," I said tiredly. "Is that all of them?"

"Yes, what did you find?"

"They were using it as a place to hold and torture prisoners," I said. "One Death Eater was killing those still alive. Whether he was sent or did it on his own I don't know. Total of seven prisoners, from what I saw they had holding facilities for a dozen or so. Six dead. One is very seriously hurt. Healer came and picked him up, they should be at St. Mungo's now."

"They?"

"Healer went too. Thing is, Tonks identified the injured wizard as her father. I cut her loose, told her to get her mom and go over to the hospital. You will not give her any grief for it. Clear?"

"I wouldn't have anyway. How is she?"

"How the fuck should I know?" I demanded before I could stop and think. "Probably a lot like how I feel."

He didn't respond to that, or if he did I didn't hear him. "The Death Eater?"

"Amycus Carrow," I said. "He's dead, broken neck."

"One less to find," he said.

It sounded like he was trying to find a bright spot. Amycus Carrow was dangerous, but he didn't rank in the top five of those still on the loose. He'd have had a hard time making the top ten.

"Ted Tonks was reported dead months ago," I said instead.

"Voldemort, and his Ministry, lied," he said.

"Yeah."

"You're thinking they lied about someone else?"

"Kind of makes you wonder, doesn't it?" I returned. "Have someone make a list of all those reported dead, and then start scratching off names that we can confirm as dead."

"Connie says her office will handle it," Travers said after a brief pause. "She has better resources, let her do it."

"I plan to. I want MIB teams up here and at the Riddle House right now. I don't care if they're our teams or you have to go down to the MIB office and kick in a few doors. I want a complete list of every spell cast in the past three years, every witch or wizard that's been inside in the same number, I want every scrap of evidence, I don't care how small, and once all of that has been collected, I want the Riddle House, the Riddle Ground-keeper's Cottage, and Gaunt Cottage burned to the ground.

"If nothing else it'll deny them a safehouse."

"It'll also deny us places to watch."

"They'd be fools to return, and I'm not going to tag them all as idiots," I retorted. "They were leaving, that's why they were killing the prisoners. They know we know about these places. They won't be coming back so it makes little sense to waste our limited manpower watching them. Besides, it'll send a message. Maybe it'll make someone think twice about harboring them if we make it a policy to torch their safehouses. Potter, out." I tapped my badge again to silence it.

"You know what this means, don't you?" Max asked from behind me.

I hadn't even noticed him come out, but I wasn't about to let him have the pleasure of knowing that. "Yeah," I said grimly. "It means whoever was camped in the Riddle House has a mole inside the Aurors."

I sat at my desk, a towel was draped over my lap and the newly bathed cat was wrapped firmly inside. It'd taken five baths for the cat for the cat to stop turning the bathwater gray as soon as it went in and more than a dozen cleaning spells to get most of the blood off my robes for Travers to sum up what I already knew about today's activities.

I had called the Aurors off the trails of at least four different Death Eaters to raid five places. We'd destroyed one (Gaunt Cottage) to prevent its further use as a safehouse and store place for Dark Artifacts. Another two (Riddle House and its out building) currently had two teams of MIB agents, plus our own in-house Auror MIB team, crawling all over them and would be burned in due time. On the upside we'd confiscated a large number of Dark or illegal items between the two Riddle buildings and Malfoy Manor. We'd managed to save one prisoner (maybe, still no word on Ted Tonks' condition), but lost six more, and the one Death Eater we'd encountered was dead so we weren't going to be finding out anything from him. And we'd also found out that there was a leak between the Ministry—most likely the Aurors—and the remaining Death Eaters.

The house-elves replaced the basin of dirty water with one of clean along with a ewer of warm water to rinse with. The cat gave it a look of disgust, but didn't try to escape this time. The fact that the water did not immediately turn grey meant we were finally making progress. The fact that the towel I'd just used to dry it was grayish instead of the yellow it originally was meant that we still had a ways to go.

The fire flared and Travers stopped speaking as Shackbolt came through.

"Winton," he nodded to Travers in greeting.

"Minister," Travers said.

"Harry," he continued to me.

"Kingsley," I said, nodding a greeting of my own before I turned to scrubbing the pitiful ball of fur in the basin.

"About the raid today," he said.

"We saved one person, seized a lot of dark magical items, and burned down a couple of buildings," I said. "Mission was a failure, we neglected to bring marshmallows."

My attempt at humor did not succeed. "And you tied up all the resources of your department, leaving the LEP to handle anything that cropped up that should have been your responsibility," Kingsley said. "You also tied up all of the LEP-Recon team to use as your reserve, and don't get me started on the expenses incurred."

"I'd have thought you'd be proud," I said. "I'm taking a page from my enemy's book and throwing money at my problems."

"You've also gotten a lot more sarcastic than I remember."

"Kingsley, I knowingly and deliberately allowed myself to be hit with the killing curse not twenty-four hours ago because of the ravings of a drunk fraud, the ramblings of an old man, and the memories of a person who spent almost half his life loathing my very existence. That kind of thing changes a man."

Kingsley frowned, "I pushed to soon, didn't I?" he asked softly. "Harry, if you need some time then take it."

"And do what?" I asked. "Sit and mope on a beach in Majorca and slowly drive myself insane? Why the hell did you even give me the job if you don't think I can do it?"

"I never said that—"

"Dragon-dung! What exactly were you trying to accomplish by putting me here, Kingsley?"

Kingsley spread his hands, "What would you like me to tell you, Harry?"

"The truth would be a pleasant change," I said bitingly.

"I trust you," he said. "I'd say the same for all of my former colleagues, but at least one appears undeserving of that trust. I couldn't bring someone from inside. Your mistrust of the Ministry is on record, having you onboard with the changes being made helps the public to trust us. That's especially important right now since they have no control over the changes we're going to be instituting in the next year. You're young, popular, a national icon..."

"A hero," I interjected.

"People listen to you, follow you."

"I'm a symbol," I said.

"Yes you are," Kingsley agreed. "Exactly what type of symbol you want to be, though, is up to you. You can...inspire people in a way that few people I know ever could. Dumbledore had it, a little."

"James," Travers said. "Frank."

Kingsley shook his head. "James Potter was charismatic as hell, that's something different. I'll give you Frank though." He looked at me, "Frank Longbottom had a way of bringing things out of people. He'd go into the bad side of 4:1 odds with this sort of supreme confidence that you'd do anything to keep from disappointing him."

His eyes had taken on a far-off look. "If someone had told me three years ago that a handful of fifth and fourth year students would hold off twelve Death Eaters, including Bellatrix Lestrangle, long enough for help to arrive I'd have laughed in their face."

He was silent for a moment, "And yet you managed to do that. In fact, you managed to incapacitate two of them for the duration, and another four temporarily before help arrived, and after it did, you helped take down two more and forced Bellatrix Lestrangle to flee."

"She had the choice of running or waiting around for a chance to fight Dumbledore," I said. "I would have run too, were I in that situation."

"Harry—"

I held up a hand. "Stop." Lo and behold, he did. "I told you last night, this morning, whenever, that I'd do the job to the best of my ability. I meant that at the time, and I mean it now. Right now I just want to know one thing."

He hesitated, then nodded.

"Do you want me to sit behind my desk, looking pretty and parroting whatever you want me to while Travers and Hammers run the Aurors," I said, not bothering to see how Travers took the question. "Or do you want me to actually be your Chief Auror?"

Kingsley started to reply, then stopped and rubbed his forehead. "Auror," he said finally.

"Excellent," I said with a smile. "Make sure Connie knows that."

Kingsley frowned at me. "She is your boss, Harry."

"Look, Kingsley, right now the public loves me," I said. "Pretty soon, though, it's going to hate me. It always has before, it always will. Goes with the whole 'hero' gig. The moment you appear a little bit human the banners come down and up go the cries for crucifixion. If she wants to fire me, all that means is that I won't have to be here putting up with it when the tide turns."

"And you wouldn't miss it, or regret not having a chance to reform the Ministry?" Kingsley asked. He waved a hand before I could respond. "You don't need to answer, but try not to burn all of your bridges around you."

"Fair enough," I said. I turned to Travers, "Did we get anything from the people downstairs about Rookwood?"

"No," Travers said. "We're 'not authorized to know that'," he added disgustedly.

"Rookwood?" Kingsley asked.

"I wanted to know what he was working on in the Department of Mysteries. See if it was something that would help him hide or maybe help lead us to him or something," I said.

Kingsley nodded, "They always liked their mysteries. I'll see what I can do."

I rinsed the cat and reached for the thick towel the house-elves had places next to the ewer.

"Is there anything else we need to discuss?" I asked.

As though on cue the door opened and Ron walked in, only to hesitate when he saw who I was with. "Sorry to interrupt," he said. "I was only told this was Harry's office, not that he was in a meeting, Kings-er, Minister."

Kingsley just waved it off. "Not a problem, Mr. Weasley, we were just finishing up."

"Done?" I asked.

Ron nodded tiredly. "Yeah, and no tracking charms so..." he shrugged. "The official reports are going to take some time, but I have the final casualty list from last night."

I took it. It was much the same as the one Hammers had given me this morning. Here and there a name had traded places. In a few cases names had been changed as mistaken identities were corrected. The Order had been hard hit. In the DA... "Still no sign of Justin?"

Ron shook his head. "Not that I've heard. You-Know—" Ron stopped at my look. "V-V—the Ministry liked to announce whenever they'd caught another 'subversive'. Since they never claimed to have caught or killed Justin..." he shrugged.

"No news is good news?" I asked skeptically. Given that they'd reported Ted Tonks as dead while he was still apparently alive meant that they could have just as easily killed Justin, dumped his body in a ditch somewhere, and forgotten all about it.

"In this case, yes," Travers said. He turned to Kingsley, "I believe the LEP was assigned to go over the Snatcher and Muggleborn registration records to find those that were aiding the previous regime?"

"I'll make sure that they forward their reports to you," Kingsley promised.

"Excellent," Travers said.

"Good, since that's taken care of, it's been a long day and I'm going to go home and crash for a few hours before doing it all again."

"There is one other matter," Kingsley said.

"Of course there is," I said. "Out with it Kingsley."

"There is a press conference in the Atrium, a small one, but you have to say something. I intended you to have you up there fifteen minutes ago but—"

"You can't seriously be expecting me to—Kingsley, they hate my guts."

"Don't be foolish," Kingsley said. "You admitted yourself that right now they love you."

"All the more reason for me to avoid them."

"All the more reason for you to keep them friendly to you," Kingsley said.

"Not gonna happen," I said, crossing my arms.

Kingsley fingered his wand.

"You aren't seriously considering stunning me and dragging me up there...are you?"

"Not stun," Kingsley said.

"Body-bind?" Ron added.



"Et tu Ronald?" I asked.

Ron frowned slightly and his nose wrinkled the way it does whenever he gets confused, then he shook his head. "Whatever," he said. "King—Minister Shacklebolt has a point, Harry."

"Fine," I sighed heavily. "I'll go, I'll even play nice."

"Excellent," Kingsley said, mimicking Travers. "We have a prepared statement for you," he said handing me a scroll, "and here are answers to questions you are likely to be asked," another scroll, "and these are things we don't want you to talk about," a third scroll, "and then you can leave right after the answer and questions session."

I tucked the mostly-dry cat into my pocket and set off, pausing long enough to drop the scroll with 'answers to questions I was likely to be asked' into a fire. I skimmed over the scroll with 'things we'd prefer that you don't speak about' but mostly it was filled with things I didn't know so it joined the second scroll in the fire.

"Witches, Wizards, and Beings of the Magical British Empire, its territories and environs—" the scroll went on like that for almost a half-foot before I cut it off, leaving the last eight to ten inches unvoiced. "I am Harry Potter—" no need to recite the long list of things I've been called "—and it is my distinct pleasure to be speaking to you tonight.

"I have some prepared comments," true enough, "After which I will not be personally answering any questions, but I believe Minister Shacklebolt may." Take that, Kingsley.

"The dark days that gripped our land are no more. The Dark Lord—" here I deviated from the stock 'You-Know-Who' to "—Tom Marvolo Riddle, the self-styled 'Lord Voldemort', has been defeated." I wandered away from the text to add, "This, of course, is something that many of us remember hearing before; unlike last time, this time we have a body."

There were a couple of nervous twitters so I went back to the script. I very carefully did not mention that I was worried that he might not be as dead as I thought. Plenty of time to panic them later if I felt it was warranted or felt the need to create complete and utter chaos.

"In the wee hours of the morning a climatic battle was fought on the grounds and in the halls of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. I myself personally engaged the Dread Lord in single combat and—" I stopped. Whoever had written this had not one clue as to how I'd actually beaten Riddle and invented a duel that would have made Merlin weep in envy to have witnessed.

Merlin, I'd become Fudge.

Oh hell no.

I rolled up the scroll and tossed it in the fireplace behind me.

Everyone was watching me, which was about normal, but for once everyone was silent. Heh.

"My name is Harry Potter. I've been alternately praised and vilified by many of you people gathered here. By the witches and wizards of this nation I've been worshiped and hated. By goblins, and centaurs, and merpeople, and werewolves, and pretty much everyone else, I've been ignored, for which they have my heartfelt thanks.

"Now, I could tell you a pretty story filled with adventure and daring-do; but I'm not going to. I'm not a storyteller, and I'm not a politician."

A scattering of coughs and snickers, but everyone was staring at me in rapt attention.

"I will tell you the honest truth. When I can't tell you something, I'll tell you that too rather than lie about it. What I will not do is knowingly lie to you."

Another pause, no response this time.

"In the early hours of the morning a battle was fought at Hogwarts. Voldemort and his allies were confronted by Aurors and members of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement not under the sway of the puppet regime Voldemort had placed in charge of the Ministry. They were joined by the Professors of Hogwarts, students who rose up in defense of their school, and citizens who could not and would not stand aside while Voldemort spread his messages of fear, prejudice, and intolerance."

This time I had to stop speaking for the spontaneous cheering that filled the hall. For Merlin's sake, I'd just told them what they already knew, why couldn't they have waited until I'd told them something new?

"The battle—" I stopped and cast a sonorous charm on my throat. "THE BATTLE—" they calmed down and I took it off. "Thank you, as I was saying, the battle was not without cost. The damage to Hogwarts and grounds, including large portions of the Forbidden Forest has been described as 'extensive but largely reparable'. I will let the Headmistress and Board of Governors fill you in more once the total extent of the damage has been determined as well as what steps will be needed to repair it.

"The casualties were extensive. Many of the best and brightest of our community came when called, and now are among the dead. The Auror office, already well below its minimum force-level when Fudge admitted that Voldemort had returned, is down to barely two-thirds the strength it had then and many are in St. Mungo's. More than ten students are dead, and only because the great majority of Hogwarts' youngest students were evacuated even as the battle begun were there not more."

I saw hands go up, but the question was easy enough to figure out. I gave the same answer I heard on the telly at the Dursleys. "No names are being released at this time pending notification of next of kin." The hands went down.

"Voldemort himself is dead. Unlike the last time his demise was reported, this time there is a body. I can personally attest to that he was struck with a Killing curse and—"

"Mr. Potter, how do you know he didn't survive it?"

The reporter had been stupid enough to stand so it was easy to tell who deserved to get glared at. "Because it is called the 'Killing curse' for a reason, Mr...?" I said dryly.

"Spoke, Atlas Spoke for the Portsmouth Prognosticator," he said. "But you yourself were struck with the same curse and survived. How do you know that You-Know-Who did not?"

I felt the familiar headache I got around Rita forming and resisted pinching the bridge of my nose. "Mr. Spoke, I would assume—and you understand how this assumption is based off the fact that I am still alive, and, since I was little over a year old at the time I don't actually remember—that after I was struck with the curse in question I remained breathing. I can assure you that such was not the case with Voldemort."

"Oh," he said, sitting back down. "Er, thank you."

"Many of Voldemort's closest allies," I continued, "were either killed or captured in the battle. Those names are also being withheld pending notification of next-of-kin, in the case of the dead, or formal charges are filed in the case of the captured."

Another pause for the spontaneous applause to quiet down.

"That was the situation as of early this morning. Since then Kingsley Shacklebolt, as I'm sure you are all well aware, has been named Minister of Magic."

Applause.

"Since then he has declared that our country will be under martial law for a term of a year and a day." This was where things got tricky. Dumbledore had told me one that the truth was a glorious and terrible thing that should be guarded closely. It was him and Severus that had told me that the best lie was one where you told the truth and let your enemy jump to an incorrect assumption.

"This is a measure not taken lightly but one, it is felt, that is necessary in order to root out those supporters of Voldemort still in the Ministry," true enough, "change the conditions in both the Ministry and Wizengamot that allowed Voldemort to come to power," also true, but not the whole truth, "and eliminate the corruption in the Ministry that has plagued it for more than a generation."

No applause now, but rapt attention. In fact, they sort of reminded me of the DA in the way they were hanging on to every word. Sort of. Maybe.

Who was I kidding? They had the morals of an alley cat in heat, the ethics of jackals, and the souls of sharks. They'd do anything for a story, and once they smelled blood they'd rip the poor bastard apart.

"Minister Shacklebolt has asked me to take charge of the Auror Office, and I have agreed. My statements about my objections to past Ministry policies, and mistrust of the Ministry in general are, I believe, all a matter of the public record. I want to say now that I have full confidence and trust in Minister Shacklebolt, and it is my opinion that one of the reasons he asked me to take the job was because of my stance on past Ministry policies, and especially those that came from the Minister of Magic personally."

Applause, more scattered this time but it seemed that at least some of them were thinking about what I'd said before applauding rather than just clapping away madly whenever my mouth opened; which meant that at least one of them had two brain cells to rub together—even Bagman wouldn't take bets on there being two.

"It will be Minister Shacklebolt's job to reform the Ministry and Wizengamot, and he will have my full support to accomplish that task," I said. "However, it will not be my task. My job is to protect all of us from the threats still out there. Several of Voldemort's most fanatical supporters have not been detained and it is my job to hunt them down and bring them to justice."

"Who?" someone shouted.

"Among those still at large are former Unspeakable Augustus Rookwood, Antonin Dolohov, one of his oldest supporters, the werewolf known as Fenrir Greyback, and Bellatrix Lestrange who was erroneously reported as dead this morning only to go missing from her secure room at St. Mungo's."

Again cries filled the Atrium, but they weren't the inane applause or wild cries of earlier.

I resisted the urge to draw my wand and douse them all with water. I settled for a series of loud bangs.

"Bellatrix was reported dead for a reason," I snapped. "That was because we thought she was. A Healer specializing in severe spell damage recognized that she was actually still alive and it was

decided, without consultation on my part or the Minister's, to try and save her and bring her to trial. Even with the best magical medical treatment available St. Mungo's report said that she was unlikely to survive. Also, the way she is believed to have escaped—via a time-delayed portkey which she had swallowed prior to the battle—is not something that is regularly done because of the stress it puts on the body and the dangers that come with it."

Which, as far as I know, was just so much dragon dung but they ate it up.

"So you're saying she's dead?" someone asked.

"I'm saying that all the experts who dealt with her case are telling us that she is unlikely to have survived the day with treatment. That she no longer has access to that treatment and the portkey will have worsened her condition. However, until we have conclusive proof that she is dead the Auror Office will continue under the assumption that she is still alive and dangerous. Clear?"

"Yes, thank you." She sounded like she meant it too. How very odd.

"Very well, now, these are the measures that have been taken to combat these threats," I continued. "I have put in place plans to expand the Auror force. While measures are being taken to do this as quickly as possible, it takes time to train an Auror and that can't be reduced much without sacrificing quality.

"In the mean time, the Hit-Wizards have been rolled back into the Aurors. Arthur Weasley, perhaps the best investigator in the Ministry, has agreed to head our investigations task force. The Magical Investigations Bureau has permanently loaned us one of their teams. Several people with specialized skills are being hired. These steps will allow us to integrate them into our operations more easily and eliminate the need for large, multi-department planning and control groups to run small operations."

I wasn't about to tell them that a large portion of the people we were suddenly going to be fielding weren't fully-trained Aurors. It was pretty evident from what I'd just said, but that was a lot different than deliberately saying 'look, these people aren't up to seriously fighting' or something similar.

"Auror Potter!" a witch who could not have been long out of Hogwarts stood. "How do you plan on training new Aurors without assigning Aurors who are desperately needed in the field?"

"I will not, ever, discuss planned or ongoing operations," I said. "Those same Death Eaters we are all worried about read the papers too. It would be criminal on my part to put my people more at risk by telling our enemies where and when we are coming, or how they can best strike at us, and I can think of few things more crippling to our office than taking out the entire next generation of Aurors."

I paused to let that sink in. "Now, as to your question, we currently have several ideas on how to go about training Aurors without diverting the few Aurors we have available. Unfortunately it is going to take more than a couple of hours to determine which one is the most practical. Our more long-term plan is to establish a permanent training facility, though right now there has been little discussion beyond setting that goal."

She sat and frowned and the other members of the press assembled murmured amongst themselves.

"This afternoon," I pressed on. "The Aurors, backed by the LEP-Recon unit, and assisted by other sub-departments in the DMLE, raided three Death Eater safe-houses, a place used by Voldemort as a storehouse for Dark Artifacts, and a residence where Bellatrix Lestrange may have been hiding.

"The residence was found to have not been visited recently, secured, and returned to its rightful owners. The storehouse was investigated, cleared out, and then burned to prevent any Death Eaters returning and using it. One of the safe-houses was discovered to have been recently inhabited, but the Death Eaters fled moments before Ministry forces arrived. This safe-house too has been burned"

The news of that had come in just after I'd walked out of my office into the main room. The MIB were currently focusing on the ground-keeper's cottage, though Arthur Weasley had a large number of his people going through the Dark Artifacts that the Malfoy's had.

"In the second safe-house many Dark Artifacts were found, though there was no sign of the Death Eaters having been there after the

battle earlier today. The investigation and cataloging of seized objects is currently ongoing.

"The last safe-house raided was equipped, and used, by Voldemort and the Death Eaters to hold and torture wizards and witches. When it was discovered one Death Eater stayed behind to try and murder all of their victims, and in the ensuing fight, as himself killed. One survivor is currently in St. Mungo's and is listed in extremely critical condition."

"Auror Potter!"

"Yes, Ms...?"

"Tattler, Ima Tattler, Dumfries Divinator."

What an absolutely perfect name for a reporter. Her parents must have hated her from birth.

"Very well, your question, Ms. Tattler?"

"Can you tell us who the Death Eater was?"

To tell or not to tell. Should I wait until his family was notified? Hell with it, I could notify them myself here and now. "Amycus Carrow."

"Auror Potter!"

Spoke again, and he wasn't the only one on his feet.

"Yes, Mr. Spoke?"

"Is it an official policy now to burn any place discovered to have been used by the Death Eaters?"

"Mr. Spokes, my orders today were given with the intent to deny the Death Eaters places of refuge. In no case was the house in question currently occupied. It is my goal to deny the Death Eaters places of refuge that they can use to continue their reign of terror. If that means destroying private property, so be it. It is not, however, my goal or intent to conduct my own reign of terror against innocent people that those supporters of Voldemort force to aid them.



"I expect to have more to say in the future, thank you for your time," then I turned and walked away from the podium.

Kingsley was waiting for me to one side as a wizard I didn't know took my place and began speaking.

"It's not smart to deviate from the script," Kingsley said.

"Did you read what they had for me?"

"Nobody expects classic literature, Harry," Kingsley said.

"The dark days that griped our land?" I quoted. "Kingsley, I sounded worse than Fudge did, and that was the high point!"

"Maybe," Kingsley said. "But you talked about how they've alternately worshiped and despised you. What do you think is going to happen when they realize that you manipulated them?"

"I told them the fucking truth," I hissed.

"Yes, but not the whole truth."

Definitely a headache forming.

"What is the whole truth?" I asked. "The system is broken, Kingsley. We can either junk the whole thing and try to create something new or we can try and fix it. For whatever reason you and your advisors have decided to fix it; fine, I'm onboard with that decision. I let them know that I support you, that decision, and that I'll do my part. It's not my fault if they don't realize just how much needs to be fixed.

"Besides, this way when they turn on us they can focus on me and you can keep doing your job. Worst comes to worst you can sack me."

"I didn't ask you to be a sacrificial goat for me," Kingsley said.

"Why not?" I asked, "I'm everybody else's." I disappeared before he could respond.

## Chapter 5: ...Only Sleep

As the day has tread into the night

And memory is painted white

A kiss will carry you away

And find us another place

Still I want again to hold your hand

A moment more to understand

How much it means, these little things

To savor one more smile

But in the silence nothing stirs

Not a rising breath to reassure

So I hang my head and hold you close

For this is only sleep

And that's the way I watch the sky

With a simple prayer to sail her by

I have to think, I must believe

That this is only sleep

-Cruxshadows-

The bodies had all been removed and the Aurors were gone, but Hogwarts was still locked up tight. The wards and protective enchantments were so powerful I could actually see them rippling in the air around the gates, like the heat distortion given by the flame on the Dursleys gas stove. Only these were far more intense and shaded with a multitude of gem-tone hues.

I reached out and touched the gate. The metal was cold but the spells were warm, almost alive, as they crawled along my skin before withdrawing and the gate opened silently.

Hogwarts always knows her own.

I set down the path as the gate whispered shut behind me. I could see the ruins of Hagrid's hut near the forest. At some point someone had done what the Death Eaters had tried a year before. The stone was blackened from the fires that had destroyed the thatched roof and gutted the inside so that all was left was a circular stone wall. Next to it the vegetable patch was choked with weeds, and further along the patch where Hagrid had grown giant pumpkins for Halloween was empty.

The grounds were ragged and torn. The path to the castle had been reduced to little more than rubble in places. The grass stained with blood and missed spells, burnt where at least one person has used a flame-based cursed, gashed and cratered from a variety missed or deflected slashing, bludgeoning, or exploding spells. One whole area was torn up where centaurs had wheeled to shower arrows into the Death Eaters' flank. An area near the lake was still the swampy mire courtesy of the Weasley twins, and in the distance only five goal rings rose above the Quidditch pitch.

I paused in my trek towards the castle and walked over to the shores of the lake. It was calm, the surface like a massive pane of smooth glass. The lake was many things, but it was so large it was rarely smooth. I reached down to pick up a few stones to skim across it. I found a few that were adequately smooth, but when my fingers found one that was deceptively heavy I looked down. Nestled among a trio of water-smoothed rocks was a black stone, polished smooth, with a crack in one face that bisected a triangle with a circle in it.

I wanted to scream and I barely resisted the urge to heave the whole lot out into the lake. I had abandoned the Resurrection Stone in the Forbidden Forest and I had fully intended to leave it there. Now it was in my hand after being picked up on the shore of Hogwarts Lake.

I thrust the stone angrily into my pocket not occupied by the cat and stalked off towards the castle. Albus' portrait had better be up to

answering some serious questions or I was going to yank his ethereal arse out of his 'next great journey' pretty damn quick, and thanks to the Stone I could do just that.

The steps up to Hogwarts were cracked; the thick, wall-like guard on the left had been sheered off at the third step up; and the massive right-hand door hung askew. Eight suits of armor armed with halberds lined the flight of four stairs and a ninth—this one with only a sword—stood in front of the doors. As I approached the armor braced to attention and the halberds swept up from resting with the butt on the ground to generally pointing at me while the ninth drew its sword.

I drew my wand but didn't slow.

As I stepped foot on the first stair the suits of armor turned to face in, and the halberds rotated down until the polished heads were held inches off the ground with the butts up in the air in the general vicinity of the armor's right shoulder. The last suit of armor opened the door and saluted with his sword when I reached the top step and I returned it with my wand.

Great, even the suits of armor were acting weird.

The armor slammed the door shut behind me. I could hear the party still going on in the Great Hall. I really did not want to join them so I started to head down to Severus' rooms where I could order some grub via floo and house-elf.

Tonks was sitting on the couch teasing Teddy by holding his plush werewolf just out of reach. She bolted upright as soon as I stepped into the room, wand pointed right at my left eye. After a moment she relaxed a little.

"Surprised to see me?" I asked.

"No," she said tightly.

I closed the door and waited.

She didn't say anything but nudged the toy close enough that Teddy was able to grasp onto the tufted tail and stuff it into his mouth.

"You're surprised to see me," she said finally.

I shrugged, "Yeah."

"I told you our last safehouse had been found, didn't I?"

I honestly didn't remember if she had or not. I settled for shrugging again. "I sort of expected you to be at St. Mungo's, but I doubt this is the only place you could have gone." Actually, I'd have thought she'd have gone to her parents' if she hadn't stayed at the hospital.

"You said it was the safest place you know," she said.

"I thought you didn't trust me," I said as I crossed to Severus' room. I needed to use the loo and I wasn't going to use the one in the guest room if she was staying.

"It won't work, I tried all the combinations of your mother's name I could think of," she said as I reached for the doorknob.

It worked this morning, but it hadn't required a password. I drew Severus' wand and set it on a bookshelf, and then set my wand down next to it and tried the door.

Locked.

Picked up my wand, and the door opened swiftly and silently. The man despised me, did his best to keep me alive because he was obsessed with my mother, and had at some point keyed my wand to his wards. Alastor Moody had been paranoid. Severus was certifiably insane.

"He keyed your wand into his wards?" Tonks asked.

"That's what it looks like," I said.

I didn't wait to hear what else she had to say.

When I came back she was cuddling Teddy in her arms while he happily slobbered on the toy werewolf.

"Have either of you eaten yet?" I asked.

"I just fed him," she said. She smiled slightly and flicked the werewolf's ear, "he really likes it."

I nodded and used the floo to ask the house-elves for food, and then Minerva so that I could interrogate one annoying portrait later.

"How's your father?" I asked.

The small smile she'd had while playing with Teddy disappeared. "He's dying. The Healers say a day or two, three at the most. If he'd been healthier or if we'd stopped the spell sooner... The damage is too bad; they can't repair it without killing him so all they can do is try and give him a little time.

"He and Mum wanted some time alone," she added before I could ask why she wasn't with them.

"I'm sorry," I said. It sounded weak and feeble but I couldn't think of anything else to say.

"The Healers wanted to know how I stopped the curse," she said, deliberately not looking at me. "They'd apparently had people come in and die of it because they couldn't stop it or reverse it."

"I know there is a specific counter," I said. "But I don't know what it is."

"But you did know how to stop it," she said.

"I did some experimenting, that curse is really useful for cutting and splitting firewood."

I considered her while we ate. I had planned to go up and scream at Dumbledore's portrait for a while, but I knew that sooner or later we'd end up talking about last night. We always ended up talking and I doubted a portrait of him would be any less...irritating than the real thing.

I really did not want to talk about, well, anything, actually, but I'd promised McGonagall the whole story behind Severus, and Ron and Hermione deserved it as much as anyone could. I floo-called the Burrow and found that they were both staying there and that

Hermione was planning on going to Australia next week to get her parents.

Teddy was asleep and drooling by the time Tonks and I had finished eating. I summoned a house-elf to take the dishes and headed for the door.

"Going out again?" Tonks asked.

I turned and looked at her and raised an eyebrow. Lots of time in the tent spent in front of a mirror to get that nailed, but worth it.

"You'd better learn to pace yourself," she said, her voice detached, almost distant. "Or you're going to get killed because you're tired. It's your call if you want to go that way, but you don't have the fucking right to endanger the rest of us."

No raised voice. No visible display of anger. No fiery red hair. If anything she sounded tired.

"Just going to talk to a portrait in the Headmaster's Office," I said. "You can come along if you want, learn all the nasty details about my life you were so hot for earlier." I turned and stalked away without waiting to see if she'd decide to come or not.

Ron and Hermione were standing in front of the gargoyle protecting the entrance to the Headmistress' tower office. Hermione had her head down and looked upset, and Ron was standing with his arm awkwardly around her shoulders.

"Harry," Hermione said a bit quickly, "Are you all right?"

"I'm still alive," I said.

"Beats the alternative," Ron said.

I shrugged. "I guess." I nodded at the statue, "Did either of you try to open Stone-boy yet?"

Was it my imagination or did it glare at me?

"We've tried but haven't had much success," Hermione admitted.

"Or any at all, for that matter," Ron added.

"Funny," I said. "Candy canes."

Ron and Hermione stared at me. The gargoyle didn't do much of anything.

"For all the...just open the bloody door," I told it.

It smirked at me and shook its head.

What was the world coming to where you couldn't even get a decent charmed statue that did what it was told?

I pictured a large boa constrictor wrapped around its neck, much like the first snake I had ever talked to seven years and a lifetime ago. "Open."

The gargoyle froze, its face twisting into a horrible grimace, much like the one Severus had when Lockhart offered to brew the Mandrake restorative draught for the people petrified by the basilisk.

"Harry," Hermione gasped. "I didn't know you could do that!"

I shrugged. "I didn't either." I smirked and added with stressed sibilants, "It looks like old Salazar Slytherin spread his snakes all over the school."

Hermione glared at me.

"Honest," I said, raising my hands defensively. "I found one that let me access both the Slytherin common rooms and their head student suite."

"Cool," Ron said. "Did you curse Malfoy?"

"Worse," I said, and headed up the stairs.

"Worse? Harry Potter, what did you do?" Hermione demanded from behind me.

"I hired him," I said.



"You did what?" Ron screeched.

"Ronald, there's no need to scream," Hermione hissed.

"I didn't scream! Did you hear what he said? He said he hired Malfoy!"

"I heard him quite clearly. Perhaps you should see if Madam Pomfrey can examine your ears since it seems there is some obstruction because you, clearly, did not."

Oh yes, the ever-familiar Hermione/Ron bicker battle.

"When's the wedding?" I asked. It was a weak joke, but it was a joke.

"We haven't decided," Ron said.

"Ronald!"

I stopped abruptly, feeling like someone had shoved their wand into my belly and cast a cruciatis curse. There wasn't any pain, but it hurt. I turned around as the stairs deposited us at the top. "W..." I paused to wet my suddenly dry lips. "What did you say?"

Hermione sighed, "We haven't decided yet, Harry." Ron was smart for once and stood awkwardly next to Hermione but let her speak for the both of them. "Ron asked me early this morning, after...after you killed Voldemort," she said the name in a rush, "and I agreed. We agreed to tell you first but..." she hesitated, but then pressed on, "but with Ginny dying we weren't sure if it was the right time and..."

Hermione not knowing what to say is one of the rarest things in the universe, but I was no condition to properly appreciate it. "Oh," I said softly, then added, "Congratulations, both of you." I tried to sound like I meant it, which I did, but my heart just wasn't in it.

I fled into Albus Dumbledore's old office and left them standing there.

A full day hadn't transpired and already McGonagall had changed the office from the glimpses of it I had seen in Severus' memories. The bookshelves were still present, but gone were the heavy, dark-wood ones Severus had used. Instead they were of a lighter wood and, while still devoid of ornamentation, lacked the heavy box-like

construction of Severus'. One case, empty of books, held pictures of graduating classes and Gryffindor Quidditch teams, another held still more photos—I recognized one of the Marauders with my mother, and another of myself, Hermione, and Ron by the lake—along with an assortment of knickknacks and an ornate silver tea service large enough for half again the Hogwarts faculty.

The Sword of Gryffindor was mounted on brackets above the mantle of the fireplace. The Sorting Hat was perched on top on another shelf. The crystal bowl on the desk filled with lemon drops when Dumbledore was Headmaster had been replaced by a tartan tin filled with biscuits.

I took a biscuit and tossed it on the floor near the fireplace and focused on a couch. Transfiguration, especially the high-level stuff, is as much about picturing what you want to happen as it is being able to knowing what the spell is supposed to do and actually being able to perform it. That's one of the reasons why inanimate-to-animate spells are so difficult you go from a simple system to several extremely complex ones.

I'm far from an expert in transfiguration and admittedly theory has never been a particularly strong suit of mine, but I've never had a problem with my imagination and I, well, Voldemort declared me his magical equal when I was age fifteen months. I am well above average on the scale for sheer magical power.

The couch I got was old, battered, patched and re-patched and stitched back together. The upholstery was faded and worn, and replaced on two of the pads with a completely different color and pattern. Two of the legs were mismatched with each other as well as the other two. But despite all of these faults it was more than made up for in comfort.

The cat crawled out of its pocket and curled up in my lap. I got the vial of purple stuff and rubbed more into the wound.

It purred at me in response.

The door to the office opened and the cat took off as McGonagall entered followed by Hermione and Ron. The cat dashed across the floor, and for a moment I thought it was going to run head-long into a bookcase, but a small hole in the wall appeared before it, perfectly

sized for it, and the cat disappeared before I could say anything. Immediately the hole closed behind it.

"Did that cat just disappear into the wall?" Ron asked.

"It would seem that is the case, yes," McGonagall said frowning. First at the bookcase where the cat had disappeared, then at me.

"Pixel."

I looked at Hermione, "That was nice and random. Is it some form of new greeting? A pixel to you?"

She glared at me. "It's from a book," she said crossly. "A cat named Pixel that can walk through walls. Do you know where he came from?"

"It, she, has been following me around all day," I said. "I guess 'Pixel' is better than 'Cat'."

McGonagall looked at my couch distastefully, but then conjured a trio of armchairs for herself, Hermione, and Ron. They were lovely red-leather things that matched perfectly, but I bet they weren't half as comfortable as my couch.

There was a knock on the door and Tonks stuck her head in. "Am I late?"

"We haven't started yet," I said neutrally.

She nodded and came in: Teddy curled in her left arm, diaper bag thrown over one shoulder, wand hand free just in case. No sign of her usual clumsiness. I was going to have to see if there was an office pot (another useful thing I learned from sneaking peeks at the telly when I was living at the Dursleys, there is always an office pool) and get in my five galleons that it was all an act.

Tonks glanced at the chairs, then promptly sat down at the other end of the couch from me before McGonagall could transfigure another chair for her.

"Now that we're all here," I said, drawing my wand. I pointed it at Dumbledore's painting, then jerked the tip towards a bookcase

opposite the couch. The painting came off and slammed into place against the bookcase. "Wake up, Old Man, you may have them fooled but you haven't got me fooled."

McGonagall, who had started to object at the rough treatment, paused when Dumbledore 'woke' and said, "Ah, Harry, I did hope to hear from you today."

"I just bet you did," I said. "How much of the real Albus Dumbledore are you?"

Hermione started to reply, but Albus beat her to it.

"An interesting question, inspired by Tom, no doubt," he said, pulling a familiar crystal bowl out of his robes and popping a lemon drop in his mouth. He looked down at the bowl, then said sheepishly, "I'd offer you one but they are unable to leave my painting."

I resisted the urge to ask if anyone had ever actually accepted the offer.

"As to the answer," he continued, "Hogwarts retains all the knowledge of her Headmasters and Headmistresses. These paintings serve as a way of accessing that knowledge. The exact methods are complex and quite secret, of course."

Of course it is. Bloody magical world and its precious little secrets.

"There are limits, of course, of what we are capable of. For example, the older we get the harder it is for us to interact with the material world. But we are painted to resemble our originals, both visually and in the way we interact. "

"Excellent," I said. "Because I am tired, short-tempered, and have questions. But first..." I pulled out my wand and cast a number of secrecy spells, followed by one of Severus' own devising that would fill the ears of anyone trying to listen in with static.

"Harry," Hermione said wide-eyed.

"What?"

"Your wand," she pointed at the wand in my hand, her face pale.

"What about it?"

"It was broken, snapped," she said. "You can't...it's impossible to repair a broken wand."

"Yeah, well, I've been doing the impossible for years," I said but Dumbledore's eyes were wide. "Some of you know various parts of the story, so I guess the first question should be where to begin."

"At the beginning, of course," McGonagall said.

"It's not that simple, Professor," I said, leaning back in the couch. "Do I start at my beginning, Voldemort's beginning," I glanced at Dumbledore's portrait, "or do I start at a beginning that precedes even that?"

He didn't respond. "The real beginning, I suppose, was when an extraordinarily gifted wizard named Gellert Grindelwald sought out the other most gifted wizard of his generation. Together they came up with a plan of uniting the magical and muggle worlds for the betterment of all; and to unit a trio of magical artifacts considered a fairy tale by some and something dreamed up by an imbibor of halitosis by the rest.

"A couple of months later Albus' brother Aberforth told them both to grow up. An argument ensued, followed by a fight. When it was over Albus' sister was dead, Grindelwald fled, and the brothers stopped speaking to each other for more than a century."

McGonagall opened her mouth, closed it, and finally looked at Albus' portrait. "You mean what that Skeeter woman wrote was true?"

"Rita," Albus said calmly, "has a talent for taking what is true and sensationalizing it, Minerva. It is what separates a writer of gossip articles from a true journalist."

McGonagall pressed her lips together and turned to me. "What artifacts?"

"The Deathly Hallows is the most common name for them," I said airily.

"Nonsense, the Hallows are a myth," she said.

"I'm afraid, Headmistress, that you are myth-taken."

Hermione winced, Ron and Tonks groaned, and McGonagall's glare would have turned a basilisk to stone.

"The Elder Wand has a long documented, and bloody, history," I said.

"Something claiming to be the Elder Wand, or more probably several somethings, have a long and bloody history," McGonagall said.

I shrugged, "The Stone, well, I'll get to that later. The Cloak, though, has been in my family for generations."

"Several cloaks," McGonagall said.

I shook my head. "One cloak. Remember what the qualities are attributed to it."

"It doesn't get worn or tears," Hermione recited, "it never goes opaque with age, and it is impossible to be detected through it."

"But Harry," Ron said suddenly, "that last one isn't true of your cloak. You said it yourself that Moody, er, Crouch Jr., was able to see through it that time in the hallway. And you said that first year Professor Dumbledore saw you in it."

"He only told me that he didn't need a cloak to be invisible," I said. "He was waiting in the room for me, not following me through the halls."

"But still, Moody?"

"Yeah, at the time I thought he saw through the cloak, I'll admit that," I said. "But I was wrong."

"The map," Hermione said, straightening in her chair. "He had the map before he 'saw' you, didn't he?"

I nodded.

"Okay, so the map can see through the cloak," Ron said.

"What map?" McGonagall pressed.

"A magical map of Hogwarts made by Harry's father and his friends," Hermione explained. "It marks the location of everyone on the grounds or in the school. Even if they are under Polyjuice or an animagus the map marks them with their rightful names."

"And the cloak?"

"The cloak didn't remove the wearer from Hogwarts," Hermione replied.

"Besides," I cut in, "unless you're standing on it, the thing doesn't make you invisible from below."

"If it was as perfect a way of hiding as you claim, why didn't Harry's parents use it sixteen years ago?" McGonagall asked.

"They didn't have it, Minerva," Albus sighed. "I'd asked James to lend it to me so that I could study it. It was in my possession when they were attacked."

"I see," she said. She turned to me, "And Voldemort?"

"Voldemort was born to the last surviving family descended from Salazar Slytherin. By the time he was born their once vast wealth had been reduced to a small three-room shack and a pair of ancient heirlooms, and they were all quite mad from a habit of marrying first cousins to 'keep their line pure'.

"His mother fell in love with, or at least was obsessed with, a wealthy muggle living near her home. He did not return her affections so she resorted to love potions. At some point she stopped feeding him potions and he promptly left her. By this time she was already pregnant. She lived long enough to give birth at an orphanage and name him." I raised my wand into the air and wrote as I recited: "Tom after his father, Marvolo after hers, Riddle."

A swish. I AM LORD VOLDEMORT glimmered in the air before a sweep of my wand vanished it.

"Tom Riddle," McGonagall said, "oh how I remember. He was in the year ahead of me. The Chamber of Secrets then, it was his doing and not Hagrid's, I presume?"

I nodded.

She glared at Albus' portrait. "I told you. I told you at the time that Hagrid didn't do it. That Riddle was lying."

"What would you have had me do, Minerva?" he asked, spreading his hands. "Armando believed Tom, wanted to believe Tom. Hagrid's past record of bringing creatures into the castle was compelling, and I had little other than suspicions and several students too terrified to speak with which to refute Tom's statements."

"And you hoped that you could still convince him to see the error of his ways and become a good little boy," I said.

"Is mercy so bad a quality to have, Harry?"

"Your brand of it was," I said. "How did that thing you told me in this office after my fifth year go—that thing about how indifference and neglect hurt more than outright dislike?"

"Have I ever been indifferent or neglectful to you?" Dumbledore asked.

"I spent ten of my first eleven years living in a cabinet under the stairs, because you wanted to 'spare me' from growing up famous and protect me from Voldemort's minions that were still running around because the Ministry couldn't do its fucking job," I said casually. "Your mercy stuck your friend in a small room for five decades. I saw him, you know, through Voldemort's eyes after he sprung Grindelwald when he was searching for that thing you took from him. He was quite insane."

Dumbledore flinched. Oh, that must have hurt, even if it was a painting.

"Of course," I went on before he could respond, "I wasn't exactly stable myself when I came here."

"Um, mate," Ron began.



"How else would you describe a person who, after knowing about the wizarding world for three months to the day, with two months of actual magical training, goes haring off after a fully grown mountain troll?"

Hermione arched an eyebrow at me. "I was under the impression you came after me because I didn't know about the troll."

"Hermione, I hardly knew you at the time."

"I was under the impression, Ms. Granger," McGonagall said with a raised eyebrow, "that you had decided to go chasing after the troll yourself."

"And you believed that?" I asked.

"At the time," she said dryly, "I'd only known the three of you for two months."

"Which included a particularly spectacular fifty-foot dive my first time on a broom, if I recall correctly."

McGonagall's jaw worked. "As much as I may at times have questioned your sanity—and I'm not admitting I did, mind you—I have never voiced those doubts where they could get back to you."

I shrugged. "Fair enough."

"You mean the three of you really did take down that troll my last year?" Tonks asked. "I'd heard about it, but Hogwarts' rumor mill being what it is..."

"Yeah, we did," I said. "Hermione screamed, mostly, you see we thought we'd trapped it inside the girl's loo—which we had, of course—but it just so happened that it was the same loo that Hermione was occupying at the time. I had the bright idea of jumping on its back and shoving my wand up its nose."

Tonks stared at me.

"It, uh, seemed a good idea at the time?"

"I'm beginning to wonder how you managed to live long enough for V-Vol—Him to try," she admitted.

"Oh that's easy, only Voldemort could kill me. I was never worried about a measly troll."

"Harry," Dumbledore said.

"Okay, honestly? I didn't think about it or have a plan, and as I said, when I react on the fly things usually turn out okay. We had, as Professor McGonagall put it at the time, 'sheer dumb luck'. Oh, and Ron finally managed to pull off the levitating charm we'd been working on and clubbed it with its club."

"I did, didn't I?" Ron asked with a fond smile at the memory. "Best levitation charm I've ever seen."

"Anyway, Voldemort, Tom, was already using more-or-less controlled, but unfocused, magic by the time he got his Hogwarts letter. After he found out he became obsessed with finding out about the wizard who had 'abandoned' him, since if his mother had been magical she wouldn't have died."

"That's insane," Tonks said. "We're just as mortal as muggles. A little longer lived, maybe, but still mortal."

"Sanity is relative, Tonks," I said. "Most of us just choose one that works. I, for example, have a 'saving people thing'."

Hermione buried her face in her hands.

"Alastor Moody was paranoid. Severus was obsessive. I believe Percy described Albus as 'a bit mad'. Professor McGonagall, here, has the best 'stern teacher' act I've ever seen, but under it lurks a rabid Quidditch fan." McGonagall shot me a disapproving look and sniffed a little but didn't say anything. "Riddle just never settled on a form of sanity that was socially acceptable. He used his abilities to bully and terrorize, and never felt a need, or desire, to change. By the time he was made a Prefect in his fifth year he had started using his assumed name in private, and it was that year he launched his plans to achieve immortality."

McGonagall sat back sharply in her chair. "That soon?"

I nodded.

She stood. "I think we could all use some tea."

When we'd all been served tea with, save for Tonks, a generous amount of brandy, I continued.

"Beside Ron and Hermione, have either of you heard of a thing called a Horcrux?"

Tonks shook her head, but McGonagall frowned. "Only by the vaguest and nastiest of rumors."

"It's a Dark Artifact," I said. "One of the darkest, it's used to imprison a piece of a human soul."

"A piece?" McGonagall asked.

"Indeed," Dumbledore said. "Murder, killing in cold blood, puts a strain on the soul. When it is in this state it is possible for a sufficiently proficient, and evil, wizard or witch to tear a piece off and imbue it in an object."

"So a piece of a person would survive in this world past death of the caster," Tonks said.

"Yep," I said.

"And since a piece of them remained, they could come back to life?"

"Pretty much."

"So if they can be anything, why aren't we swimming in Dark Lords?"

"Several reasons," Dumbledore said. "For one, no Dark Lord would entrust such a duty to any mere mundane object. It would have to be special and guarded behind elaborate wards and traps."

"Which would point out that it's pretty special to anyone that comes looking," I said. "And so someone destroys it, what then?"

"One ring to rule them all'," Hermione muttered.

I looked at Hermione and smirked. I never had gotten around to telling her what all was on that shelf at the Dursleys and at last she had given me an opening. I pitched my voice low and rasped: "Ash nazg durbatulûk."

Tonks and McGonagall both shivered, Ron's hand crept towards his wand, and Hermione looked at me with wide eyes.

"What was that?" Tonks hissed.

"Literary reference," I said.

"Muggle fiction," Hermione said. "Harry, how did—"

"Dudley's bookshelf," I said.

"I thought that they hated anything to do with magic," she said.

"They do," I said. "It was some kind of 'Essential British Authors' collection or something. I've been waiting for almost three years to catch you."

"For those of us who weren't raised by muggles?" Ron asked.

"It's hard to explain..." Hermione said.

"There's this Dark Lord, he puts all of his power into a ring so that he can't be killed and can rule a bunch of other magical rings. The good guys figure this out and spend the next nine hundred-odd pages trying to throw it into a volcano. They eventually succeed which destroys the ring, and with it gone the Dark Lord dies."

Hermione gritted her teeth, "then again, I could be mistaken."

"The problem," I continued, "is that even if you do make a Horcrux, and it escapes detection, there really isn't enough left to do anything."

Hermione shot me another sharp look before adding, "The knowledge of their existence, let alone how to actually make one, was expunged very thoroughly. I could only find one reference when Harry told me about them. Unfortunately, that was because

Headmaster Dumbledore had removed most of the books about them from even the Restricted Section, and Hogwarts has always had one of the very best libraries of magic in existence."

"So he had access to the knowledge," Tonks said. "What about the downsides? I mean, if no one else could get them to work..." she shrugged and shifted Teddy around.

"I think that making one was an initial step," I said. "In his fifth year he used the basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets to kill a muggle-born girl and created his first Horcrux."

"Myrtle," McGonagall said.

"His first?" Tonks stressed.

McGonagall paused, and her face took on a pasty look.

"His first," I said. "Those weaknesses weren't lost on him, Tonks. He decided, after speaking with a Professor of his, to split his soul seven ways, six Horcruxes and the seventh for himself. With the danger of the school closing in the wake of the attacks he fingered Hagrid which resulted in his expulsion, and sealed the Chamber.

"That summer he snuck away from the Orphanage. His maternal grandfather was dead, but his uncle still lived there. He stole one of their heirlooms, a ring. The second heirloom, a locket, Riddle's mother had sold in Knockturn Alley. He then went to his father's house and murdered his father and his family to create his second Horcrux. He framed his uncle for the deaths, who the Aurors arrested and imprisoned, and later hid the ring inside the cottage."

"The Gaunt cottage," Tonks said.

I nodded. "Yes."

"You went back there?" Hermione asked.

"Wanted to make sure he hadn't left anything else behind," I said. "We torched it, the Riddle Manor and ground-keeper's cottage too."

Hermione frowned but didn't say anything.

"After he left Hogwarts he worked at Borgin and Burke's for a while. The place was chosen because that was where his mother had sold the locket. He found it, and a cup that had belonged to Helga Hufflepuff, in the ownership of Hepzibah Smith. He poisoned her, set her house-elf up for the fall, stole both objects, and disappeared for approximately ten years.

"The locket would be placed inside a cave where, when he was in the orphanage, he'd taken two other orphans and terrorized them. The cup he would eventually entrust to one of his most devoted servants, Bellatrix Lestrange, to keep safe. Not knowing what it was she'd put it in the safest place she could think of."

"Her Gringotts vault," Ron chipped in.

"Lucius Malfoy," I continued, "would receive the diary."

"But Bellatrix and Lucius would have still been in diapers when this happened," McGonagall said. "If they'd even been born, they certainly wouldn't have been Death Eaters."

I shrugged. "I know where they came from, and where they ended up, not where they were in between."

She frowned, but motioned for me to continue.

"Voldemort was, from the memories I've seen of him, was a really charming bastard before he was defeated the first time," I continued. "He managed to coax their stories out of the Bloody Baron and the Grey Lady. As it happens, the Grey Lady was once Helena Ravenclaw, Rowena Ravenclaw's daughter, and she provided Voldemort with the location of Ravenclaw's diadem."

"So he did have it then?" McGonagall asked.

I nodded.

"And these artifacts, are they lost?"

"All in due course," I said.

Hermione rolled her eyes, "The diary was destroyed, as were the cup and diadem. The locket still exists. I'm not sure what happened

to the ring. I know Professor Dumbledore had it, but I'm not sure what happened to it after his death."

"And the last Horcrux, the snake, correct?" McGonagall asked.

"Nagini, she's tricky," I said. "You see, he didn't make her a Horcrux until after he'd come back."

"Neville got her at the last battle," Ron pitched in. "Harry did the diary, Professor Dumbledore the ring, I did the locket, Hermione did the cup, and it was Vince Crabbe, actually, who did the diadem, though he didn't mean to. Fiendfyre, he was trying for us and burned out the Room of Requirement."

McGonagall winced, "The one room that I am not certain can be fully repaired. But how did it get in there? Did he hide it somewhere else first and only bring it once he was in power?"

"It's possible," I said. "But he returned to Hogwarts ten years after he left. Albus was Headmaster by then and refused Voldemort the Defense Against the Dark Arts job. We, Albus and I, were fairly certain he hid the diadem when he returned though we weren't sure where."

"Which explains a great deal about last night," McGonagall said. "The Room of Requirement, I assume you meant its Room of Forgotten Things? We always were meaning to clear that place out. Never could quite remember to do it, something always seemed to come up."

I nodded, and sipped my tea for a while before continuing.

"Which brings us to the first war; I believe that the details are sufficiently open to leave Voldemort there?" I got nods from the other four people.

Dumbledore in his portrait selected another lemon drop. "By all means, Harry, you tell the story well. Please continue."

This not two hours after telling the press that I wasn't a storyteller.

"Severus Snape," I said. "There's probably something very philosophical to be said about Voldemort, Severus, and myself, and

how destiny and fate were intertwined around us...but I'm not a philosopher.

"Like Voldemort and me he did not have a happy childhood. Like Voldemort and me he was a half-blood. Unlike Voldemort and me he was raised by his parents. His mother, Eileen, was a gifted Potions Mistress but indifferent to her son. His father, Tobias, a muggle, was out-right abusive. Also unlike Voldemort and me Severus had a friend growing up. A muggle-born witch who lived down the block named Lily Evens."

Once again I'd managed to catch Hermione off-guard and render her speechless. McGonagall had sat back in her chair and looked thoughtful.

"Your mum was friends with Snape?"

And Ron was his usual tactless self.

"Yes, Ron," I sighed.

"Merlin...why?" Ron asked. "I mean he's, well, Snape."

"Probably mostly for the same reason that I became friends with Hagrid," I said. "He introduced her to magic."

Ron looked queasy, but didn't say anything more.

"I remember," McGonagall said. "They appeared together quite often their first year. I thought the cross-house friendship was a good example but wasn't particularly surprised when they stopped meeting so frequently. The rumors of Voldemort were spreading when they first came here and even before that Slytherin and Gryffindor seldom got along."

"Unfortunately not all of the students saw things that way," I told her. "Those in Slytherin who didn't dislike her for being muggleborn, disliked her for being in Gryffindor. My father and his friends disliked Severus because he was a Slytherin who was friends with a Gryffindor."

"Severus felt—rightly or wrongly I don't know—that the Marauders deliberately targeted him and the staff turned a blind eye or gave



them preferential treatment. I do know that he was convinced that nothing short of actual murder would actually change anything."

McGonagall frowned, "It was a difficult time. The Marauders did a great deal to lift everyone's spirits, though I will admit that we, the staff, should have set better limits on what types of pranks were allowed and which went too far. As for preferential treatment, I have always prided myself on being a fair and even-minded teacher."

I stared at her. All the times she had told me not to worry, or to keep my head down and toe the Ministry line, and she—

"Though I will admit that I have not always been successful as I would have liked," she hissed softly. "Lee Jordan told me about the blood quill, Harry. Though, given the conditions then, I'm not at all sure what I could have done even if I had known about it except to give you the same advice I gave then."

"And if a student had come to you about attempted murder?"

"If it could be proven, expulsion," she said instantly.

"Severus went to Dumbledore," I said.

"What would you have had me do, Harry?" Albus asked.

"Attempted murder?" McGonagall asked sharply. "Here? Albus, what did you do?"

"What I could do, Minerva; perhaps if I told you the details..."

"I think, if Harry knows them, I should have them from him," McGonagall told the portrait stiffly.

"Three things happened Severus' fifth year, and I'm not sure in what order."

She nodded tightly.

"Okay, the Marauders had known for years by this point that R—" I stopped.

"Harry," Albus said gently. "I told you after you came back telling of Lord Voldemort's rebirth that if I could—"

"Spare me the pain and put me in an enchanted sleep you would," I said. "You were right though, it wouldn't have spared me and talking did help it, but that doesn't mean that this is something I want to do."

"I understand."

"That's probably one of the first wholly truthful things you've ever told me," I said.

I waved away his apology before he could speak.

"The Marauders knew that Remus was a werewolf. Only so many times you can be sick or have a relative die before people get suspicious. At some point in their fifth year they mastered the animagus transformation. James a stag, Sirius a dog, and Peter a rat. Since my father and Sirius had forms large enough to, they felt, control a werewolf they started taking runs through the Forbidden Forest."

Dumbledore choked on a lemon drop, and McGonagall turned apoplectic.

"They did what?" she screeched like Seamus' banshee boggart while her fingers turned white where they gripped the teacup. "Of all the insane things I've seen or heard done in this school... Those reckless, irresponsible—" the teacup shattered in her hand.

She vanished the remains of the teacup and tea with a swish of her wand, another swish removed the painted lemon drop from the painted Albus Dumbledore's painted throat, and then turned and glared at the four of us. "You knew?"

"Remus told us our third year," Hermione said.

McGonagall turned to Tonks.

"He told me when we were dating," she admitted. "He told me he was horrified of the risks they ran then."

I shrugged, "He told me pretty much the same."

McGonagall's expression softened and she nodded briskly and turned back to me. "I believe you said there were three things?"

"The second was an incident near the lake," I said, remembering the memory playing out before me. "My father and his friends were...studying, I suppose, goofing off near the lake. Severus was walking, saw them, and turned to walk away but Sirius hit him with a curse that flips its victims upside down in the air. Remus, despite being a Prefect, did nothing to stop it. My mother did."

"And?" Hermione asked.

"And they did, more or less, eventually." The details of the spells weren't really what was important. It wasn't what made it Severus' worst memory. It was how he reacted to Lily.

"Their friendship was pretty rocky by that point. Both houses were putting pressure on them, Voldemort's second generation of Death Eaters—Lucius Malfoy, Bellatrix Lestrange, only she was Black still, then, and the rest—were pressuring him to join them. At that point Severus had never had a friend other than Lily. He was loner by nature, and the son of a muggle would not have been welcome in Slytherin. He would have done his best to hide that knowledge, but I have no way of knowing how successful he was.

"What I do know is that he shot his mouth off, called my mother a mudblood, and even though he tried to apologize later that was pretty much the death of their friendship."

"Good riddance," Ron muttered.

Probably the same thing my dad and his friends thought. Save maybe Remus. I had a hard time imagining a Remus as...shallow as James and Sirius were then; which of course begged the question of how Ron was going to react when he found out what Severus had done for them.

"The third thing was that for some time Severus had known that what the students were being told about Remus wasn't the whole truth and had been trying to find out where, exactly, he went every twenty nine days. Sirius had the bright idea of telling him that if he used a long stick to press a certain knot on the whomping willow on

a certain night of the month, it would allow him to go down a tunnel to where Remus went."

"But that would have found—" Tonks turned white as a sheet.

McGonagall looked sick. "Did he truly mean to..."

"Sirius told me that at the time he'd meant to frighten Severus a little, make him back off," I said. "My father apparently found out about it at the last moment and managed to save Severus but by that point Severus knew the truth about Remus. I'm not sure if dad dragged Severus to Dumbledore, or if Severus reported Sirius, but this is the office where it ended up. I don't know the punishment, but I do know that Severus was firmly convinced that they were given leave to do whatever they wanted short of murder."

"A month of detentions," McGonagall said faintly. "I always wondered." She shook her head, "Albus, how could you have?"

"What would you have had me do, Minerva?" Albus Dumbledore asked the newest Headmistress of Hogwarts. "I took fifty points from Sirius in addition to a month of detentions with Horus, ten points from each of the three for being out of bounds, gave James fifty points for risking his life to save another student, and swore all involved to secrecy. I was sorely tempted to expel Sirius, but to do so I would have had to reveal Remus' part which would have meant his expulsion at best, and more likely his execution for attempted murder."

"What Sirius did was exceedingly ill-thought out, perhaps even illegal. However Severus was not the only victim in the matter."

"I would have had him with Filch every night for the rest of his time in Hogwarts, oiling those chains and iron manacles he keeps!" McGonagall snapped. "And that for starters mind you! I certainly would have taken more points than I gave out. And if I remember correctly, while expulsions have to be confirmed by the Board of Governors, it is up to the Headmaster or Headmistress to decide if a student is allowed to return for the next year. If such is the case, he would not have been welcomed back in Hogwarts."

"And with no chance for the perpetrator to learn and grown, Minerva?"

"Mercy and compassion have their place, Albus," she said sternly. "Mine would be for the student who had to share a dorm with a person who'd tried to use him as a murder weapon." She turned to me before Albus could respond. "At this point I take it Severus joined the Death Eaters?"

I shrugged. "After that incident with my mother. As I said, I'm not sure which came first."

McGonagall sat in her chair and fumed while portrait-Dumbledore selected another lemon drop and began sucking happily. Even having heard the story back in our third year, Hermione and Ron looked disturbed. Tonks looked ill.

I poured myself more tea and added a hefty belt from the bottle McGonagall had left out. Since I was spilling everything anyway I might as well have a cheap excuse.

"So what happened next?" Tonks finally asked.

"At some point Sirius' younger brother, Regulus, joined the Death Eaters. Voldemort borrows his house-elf, Kreacher, in order to test a new set of defenses around the locket Horcrux. Regulus is pretty disillusioned with the Death Eaters by this point and gets Kreacher to take him back and steals the locket, replacing it with a fake one. Voldemort killed him, but not before Regulus ordered Kreacher to destroy the locket. In any case Voldemort didn't notice the switch."

"But Kreacher didn't destroy it," Tonks said. "Ron said that he destroyed it."

"That's right," Hermione said. "Kreacher tried, but he wasn't able to destroy the Horcrux, so he hid it at Number 12, Grimmauld Place, it was there all along."

"The next major event," I continued, "is that Albus interviews Sybil Trelawny for the Divination post. He's ready to reject her when she makes a Prophecy."

"An actual prophecy?" Tonk asked. "Are we talking about the same Trelawny?"

"Albus, if you would?" I asked, and sit back as he recites, even managing to do a passable imitation of the drone she used when prophesizing.

McGonagall leaned back as he spoke. When he finished she asked, "Harry or Longbottom?"

"Me or Neville," I confirmed. I ran a hand through my hair, exposing the scare. "He chose the half-blood over the pure-blood."

"And Pettigrew was the real spy, and since Sirius was the only other one who knew about the switch," Tonks said. "But how did he know about the Prophecy?"

"Severus told him the first lines," I said simply. "Everything up to the bit about marking him, Voldemort knew. Of course when I was born and it became clear who Voldemort was planning on killing he...objected."

"You mean he was on our side all along?" Ron asked.

"Only after Voldemort made plans to kill me," I said. "I'm not sure if my mother was even pregnant with me yet when it was made. And I think it would be more accurate to say that Severus was on his own side and that his side and ours shared similar goals. He turned himself in to Albus, promised to do whatever Albus asked if Albus would protect Lily and, he eventually agreed, her family.

"Dumbledore offered Severus the Potion Master's job and Voldemort ordered him to accept. Severus had warned Dumbledore about a spy close to my family, but he didn't know who it was. When Voldemort made his target intentions known Severus asked him to spare Lily as a reward for his service, and then tried to warn Dumbledore but by then it was too late..."

"Wormtail," Ron said.

"Yeah," I said heavily. "Wormtail. Sirius tried to contact him earlier but couldn't. Dumbledore had realized that the Fidelius charm had fallen and sent Hagrid, knowing that because of the Prophecy I'd still be alive. Sirius and Hagrid met up at pretty much the same time, and Hagrid insisted that he take me to Dumbledore so Sirius gave him the motorbike and left to hunt down Pettigrew."

"And Pettigrew staged his death, killed a bunch of muggles, and escaped," Tonks said. "The Aurors arrested Sirius, but because the evidence was so 'foolproof' he wasn't given a trial and tossed in Azkaban, and Pettigrew disappeared."

"Actually," Ron said, "he spent the next twelve years living with my family as a rat."

Tonks looked at him. "A rat?"

Ron explained how Percy had 'found' the 'poor and injured' Scabbers.

"Rat went to live at the Burrow, Sirius got Azkaban, I went to the Dursleys."

"I remember," Tonks said. "Not very nice people, were they?"

I sat back on the couch, "You could say that. Or you could say that if Voldemort needed something to illustrate his beliefs about muggles, the Dursleys would have made prime examples.

"I lived in a cupboard under the stairs until I got my first Hogwarts letter. I say 'first' because it took a week, a drive to the Atlantic coast, and Hagrid knocking down the door at midnight for me to get a chance to read one. The only reason I knew I had a name other than 'boy' or 'you' before I started primary was because Arabella Figg, a squib that Dumbledore had asked to live in the area to 'keep an eye on me', used to watch me when the Dursleys went out. As it turned out I didn't even know I had a birthday until primary school."

Very unpleasant day, that. I told her I wasn't allowed one because my Aunt and Uncle had told me that only good people had birthdays and, well, more or less recited Vernon's tired old rant about how I was a parasite leaching off the lifeblood of honest working people and my parents were drunks wastrels who at least had the good sense to die quickly in a car crash before they could spawn any more little monsters...

I had thought I'd done a good job, standing up and repeating it before everyone in the class without showing how much it hurt. Dudley had laughed. The teacher had been horrified. By the end of

the day both had been called in to the school's office and I quickly learned to keep my mouth shut when teachers asked questions about my home life.

"Albus how could you?" McGonagall demanded. "I told you, I told you that those were the worst sort of muggle..." she was practically frothing.

On one hand I agreed with her. On the other, well, the Old Man had had his reasons and they'd actually been pretty good ones. "Relax, Professor."

"Relax!" she screeched. "Give me one good reason why I—"

I nodded towards Tonks, "Teddy." Personally I was wondering if Tonks was a little more closely related to the Weasleys than Sirius had said because he seemed to have Ron's talent for sleeping through pretty much everything.

McGonagall looked suitably abashed. "Please," she said. "I suppose you can call me 'Minerva', since it doesn't seem like you are going to be a student next year?" she made it a question and Ron and Hermione shook their heads as I gestured at my badge.

"Dumbledore had his reasons," I said. I wasn't sure how many of them I really agreed with, but I couldn't question the sincerity behind his motivation. To understand them you have to go back to that Halloween."

I drained my tea and walked towards the window that overlooked Hogwarts grounds. "Neither Severus nor Wormtail were with him that night. The cloak was gone, and the Fidelius meant that they had to get clear before apparating or using a portkey. James tried to delay him downstairs, he fell quickly. Lily had gone up to the nursery to get me, and it was there Voldemort found her."

"And then he killed her, and tried to kill you," Hermione said. "But because of the Prophecy he couldn't."

"The Prophecy?" I asked.



"I know Professor told you that it was because of your mother's love, Harry," Hermione said, "but how many other mothers died for their children and weren't able to save them?"

"Many," McGonagall said softly. There was no way, not even in the privacy of my own mind, I was going to call her 'Minerva'.

"Except that he didn't just kill her, Hermione," I said. "He gave her a choice."

"A choice?" she didn't understand and it frustrated her. I could practically see her mind worrying the problem like a dog with a bone as her eyes glazed.

"Deeper Magic from Before the Dawn of Time," I said.

Hermione shook her head, "But you aren't—oh." She blinked. "Oh!"

"Deeper Magic?" McGonagall asked. "I'm not sure what you are referring to, Harry."

"Another literary reference, Professor," Hermione said. Looked like I wasn't the only one with problems using her first name. "The antagonist in the story has certain magically-granted rights, Deep Magic from the Dawn of Time, chiefly of which is that every traitor belongs to her as her prey, and that for every treasonous act she has a right to a kill. One of the protagonists offers a switch and reveals a Deeper Magic from Before the Dawn of Time where if a willing victim who'd committed no treachery died in a traitor's place it'd break the original magic—"

"...and Death itself would start working backwards." Dumbledore and I both said it at the same time. I looked at him as he popped another lemon drop in his mouth and smiled benignly.

"Traitors? Treason?" Ron asked. "I'm not following."

"Plot elements," I said. "The point is that Voldemort gave her a chance to stand aside. He was only after me and she was a 'mudblood', less than worthy of his notice. If she'd stood aside she'd have lived, instead she gave herself to save me..."

"So when he tried to kill you it what...bounced the magic back at him?" Tonks asked.

"If that'd been it then probably not," I said. "But he'd just struck down two people in cold blood, both blood-relations of me, his soul was unbalanced by being split into a half-dozen parts, and he was using my death—the death of the one Prophesized with the power to defeat him—to create his 'final' Horcrux."

"It obviously failed," Hermione said. "Spectacularly."

"Obviously," I repeated the word dryly. "Since the results disintegrated his body, reduced him to less than a ghost, and did, in fact, create a Horcrux."

Complete and utter silence lasted exactly three seconds, after which Dumbledore began: "Harry, I must ask, did you—"

Ron began to demand, loudly, if we'd missed one, while Hermione asked about the snake. Whether if his soul had been split seven ways because of the destruction of the Diary or if it was actually cumulative and thus split eight ways.

Teddy woke up and began crying. I silenced Ron, glared at Hermione, and went back to the couch where Tonks was trying to settle Teddy back down.

"Do you want to hold him?" she asked.

"If it's okay," I said.

"Sure," she said, carefully passing him to me.

Immediately he stopped crying and looked up. One slobbery hand reached up and tried to snatch my glasses as his hair turned the same color of my eyes. Two shades lighter than the killing curse in all its terrible glory.

Take it from someone who has been hit with it a couple of times.

"Of course he stops crying for you," Tonks said disgustedly. "Of all the nights... If we'd known about this you wouldn't have had to hide from Voldemort, you'd have had to hide from us."

"I doubt you'd have had any more luck that he—" I wasn't fast enough to avoid the grubby little hand this time.

I heard someone snickering next to me.

"Just you wait, Tonks," I hissed as I tried to take my glasses away from him with one hand. "Five or six years when you ask me to baby-sit. I swear I'm going to load him up on sugar before sending him back."

The snickering stopped. "You wouldn't dare."

"Just you wait and try me," I said as I finally got my glasses free. Luckily they didn't seem too slobbery. I swiped them on my robes for good measure and put them back on while Teddy gurgled happily.

"How'd Snape take your mum's death?" Ron asked.

"Not well," I said. "He promised to help Dumbledore end Voldemort for good and to keep me safe. He felt he needed to...atone to my mother, I guess. He was...obsessed doesn't really begin to describe it. I spent six years being seen as 'James Potter's son' by him as an object put here to torment him, but whenever I needed 'protecting' I suddenly was 'Lily Potter's son'. I don't think he ever managed to see me without either of those labels."

Hermione nudged Ron and he began talking about meeting me on the train my first year. In fact, he told them about my entire first year through the giant chessboard—his retelling of it had McGonagall smiling in pride. Hermione added the part about getting rid of Norbert(a) and the Forbidden Forest, and told about Severus' logic puzzle. I explained about Quarrel, Voldemort, and Severus, and how Severus had explained his working against Voldemort by claiming he didn't know and sought to prevent someone unworthy from having the Philosopher's Stone.

Ron told most of my second year as well since Hermione was petrified for a good chunk of it. I explained about the Chamber of Secrets, the basilisk, and the Horcrux of Tom Riddle. Fawkes had disappeared with Dumbledore's passing and he hadn't been included in the painting, but I could just see him preening and singing a short song as his part was told.

Hermione explained third year, though I did recount my divination exam and Trelawny's second prophecy. She had just reached the part where we'd realized that werewolf-Remus was going to be heading our way when Teddy fell asleep again.

Fortunately for me most of my fourth year had been spent under the public spotlight. All I had to do was tell a bit more about Severus and Karkaroff, my first trip inside Dumbledore's pensieve, and the encounter with 'Moody' and Severus when I discovered the secrets of the egg.

Hermione and Ron knew a lot about my fifth year, but I sat back and told the story this time, starting with the dementor attack at Privet Drive and the full wizengamot trial that followed. I explained Umbridge's speech, and avoided looking at McGonagall when I told about her detentions. I explained about the dreams, about Dumbledore's refusal to teach me Occlumency, about the lessons with Severus, and then about my first Christmas where I didn't stay at Hogwarts.

I paused, and Ron took up without missing a beat as he told about Grawp and the DA, and McGonagall actually told about the confrontation in the same office we now sat in. But then I had to tell about the Department of Mysteries, starting with the Voldemort-vision in the History of Magic O.W.L, about the attempt to warn Severus—which I'd though had failed. If they had been real I probably would have failed, but Severus had known they were false and had predicted that I'd do something stupid.

That was followed by our attempt for me to contact Sirius directly and why that didn't work. Hermione explained about her leading Umbridge and me into the Forest and the attack by both Grawp and the centaurs. Which left me to tell what happened from the time we got on the thestrals until Dumbledore told me the Prophecy. Tonks looked a little bothered by my attempted use of the Cruciatus, but didn't say anything.

Which left me with my sixth year. I'd shared most of it with Ron and Hermione, but that was different from actually being there, and unlike earlier years they simply hadn't been there for meeting Slughorn, or the lessons with Dumbledore, or the confrontation with Scrimgeour at Christmas, or the hunt for the Horcrux...

I explained about getting Severus' old potion textbook and the annotations he'd made in it. About how they won me the tiny vial of luck potion and taught me to use a bezoar that allowed me to save Ron. I told them about Draco's tasks, how he cracked under the strain and I found him in Myrtle's bathroom...

Tonks paled as I told about using the spell that had almost-no, that would end her father's life. "Did you know what it—"

"Would do?" I finished. "No."

"Would you have used it if you had?" McGonagall asked.

"I don't know," I said harshly. Teddy made a soft whimpering sound and I made an effort to relax. "I'm just so bleeding tired of people throwing curses at me, at being the hero, at being ridiculed when they feel that I'm not the hero, of everything that...I just don't know."

"Harry," McGonagall said. "You don't have to do this if you don't want to. Especially not tonight."

"I only want to tell the whole thing once, Minerva," I retorted. "Some people need to hear the whole thing, some people want to, and unless I tell at least part I'm not going to get any answers from him," I gestured at the portrait of Dumbledore.

"Now see here young man," one portrait said. "The Headmasters and Headmistresses of Hogwarts are not commanded by—" his mouth kept moving but no sound accompanied it.

Silencing spells are truly remarkable things.

Between them Hermione and Ron managed to cover all of last year up to the Battle of Hogwarts, but I couldn't think of where to begin. It was Tonks who came to my assistance.

"I already know how you got the students out, through the portrait that connected the Room of Requirement to the Hog's Head," she said. "I assume you got in the same way?"

I nodded. "We came out in the Room of Requirement, of course, found out that Neville and most of the DA had been living in there.

Luna brought me up to the Ravenclaw Tower since it had the only image of the diadem, at least so far as I know. I was just looking at the thing when Alecto shows up and uses the Dark Mark to summon Voldemort, but he already knew where I was anyway. Luna stunned her, but Amycus showed up with Professor McGonagall. I hit him with the Cruciatus and Professor McGonagall tied him up."

Professor McGonagall started to say more but hesitated, then sat back in her chair. Tonks just shifted positions when I told her about using the second Unforgiveable. Yep, one lesson for Voldemort's most dangerous lieutenant and the boy-wonder could cast the Unforgivables. If the Daily Prophet knew, well, suffice to say I wouldn't be getting an Order of Merlin for taking out Voldemort. Frankly, it'd be almost worth it.

"We chased Severus out of the castle," I continued after a moment. "Professor McGonagall and the staff began to set up defenses and evacuate the students while I went after the only link to the diadem I had. The Grey Lady, once known as Helena Ravenclaw and resident ghost of Ravenclaw Tower."

"Rowena Ravenclaw's daughter?" McGonagall asked.

I nodded, "She stole her mother's diadem and fled to Albania. Ravenclaw sent a suitor of her daughter's, the future Bloody Baron, after Helena. When she refused to come back he killed her, and then himself in despair. Nine and a half centuries later Tom Riddle talked her into telling him her story...and the location of the diadem."

"Which he had hidden in Hogwarts when petitioning to work here as a teacher?" McGonagall asked.

I nodded.

"Okay, so where did he hide it, the Chamber of Secrets?" Tonks asked. "If I knew of an area of the castle that only I could access I'd have stuck it down there."

"One of the functions of the Room of Requirement was a sort of storehouse of lost and forgotten things," I said. "Some of it has been added to directly, I stashed my potion's textbook there, remember. Other's, well, I think the house-elves have been adding anything they come across that's lost or forgotten to it. I mean, it was a huge room

filled with...well, stuff. Ironically I'd actually seen the thing while hiding the book so I had an idea of where to look.

"Of course, Draco knew about it as well and he and Crabbe and Goyle had been watching us. I'm not sure what Draco was thinking, but Crabbe and Goyle were apparently thinking for themselves for once, not their strong suit by any means. We had one of our usual scuffles—"

"Only this time they were slinging Unforgiveables," Ron said.

I gave him a look but didn't remind him that I had cast, with one exception, the same spells. "Anyway, someone stunned Goyle—Hermione, I think—and then Crabbe summoned fiendfyre and lost control of it. We found some old brooms and picked up Draco and Goyle, Crabbe didn't make it. The fiendfyre destroyed the last Horcrux."

I looked down my sleeping Godson. "Ginny was supposed to be waiting right outside for us so that she could go back in the Room of Requirement after we were done. She wasn't there when we came out and then..."

And then she was gone and I didn't find out until after I'd killed Voldemort. The stone was heavy in my pocket, but there was time enough for that later.

"She was really great," Tonks said softly.

I looked up at her sharply.

"Dolohov," she took a deep breath and began again. "Remus had already been killed by Dolohov. We were in the Entrance Hall, trying to keep them contained, from getting further into the castle. Justin Early and I were being backed up by Bellatrix and Dolohov, and Dolohov took him down with this purple thing I didn't recognize.

"Ginny showed up at the top of the Grand Staircase and the next thing anyone knows she's dropping bludgeoning and blasting hexes down on anyone wearing black robes and white masks. She hopped the banister, must have charmed it or something because she's picking up speed like she's on a broomstick, sets Rosencrantz's

robes on fire and gets Guildenstern, who's about to kill Professor Slughorn, with a miss-aimed levicorpus."

I'm pretty sure I don't want to know, and Ron looks the same, but at the same time I have to know. "Miss-aimed?"

"Got his neck," she said. "Broke it cleanly, I think everyone heard."

Yet another similarity between us. She killed with a spell meant as a prank, I with a spell meant to disarm.

"I got a piece of Avery," she continued. "He was getting ready to curse Flitwick in the back and he was holding off at least three of 'em. I could see Bellatrix's wand glowing. AK, of course. She comes flying off the banister feet-first casting a banisher in mid-air that launches Bellatrix away—not sure where she ended up—gets Dolohov square in the chest with her feet—he goes down and smacks his head hard enough that he didn't even groan—and takes the curse in mid-air."

And now I know. It doesn't make things easier but it does explain some things. Ron was pale, but Hermione got up from her chair and went over to him, tapped his chair with her wand so that it grew somewhat, and then sat down half on his lap.

I traded a look with Tonks, we understood perfectly. They were together in their shared future. Tonks and I were together in shared, or at least similar, misery.

"Voldemort was in the Shrieking Shack," I said after a minute. "Vision. Had Severus up there, along with Nagini in some kind of protective field. We snuck in via the whomping willow path. Voldemort had retrieved the Elder Wand from Dumbledore's tomb but couldn't get it to work. Since it was Severus who'd killed Dumbledore he killed Severus."

Dumbledore made a sound.

I looked up at him.

"How?" he asked.



"Nagini, bit him in the neck," I said. "You know what her venom is like; there was nothing I could do."

"Did he say anything?" McGonagall asked.

"Physically?" I asked. "No, but he left me...memories. That was right when Voldemort was calling his cease-fire."

"Memories as in viewable memories?" McGonagall asked.

I nodded. "Most of it was his life, putting things into context. He was the one who suggested the polyjuiced copies of me and charmed Fletcher to forget."

"And George's ear?" Ron asked coldly.

"Unlucky miss," I said. "He was trying for a Death Eater who was drawing on Remus and missed."

"Oh," Ron said softly.

"Severus was also the one who set up the sword for Ron and me to find, his patronus was a doe. Fitting, I suppose, since my father was a stag animagus."

I turned to the portrait of Dumbledore, "I also found out that I was Voldemort's seventh Horcrux."

This time I had my wand ready and managed to put up a silencing spell on Ron before he began shouting and woke Teddy. McGonagall was as white as a ghost, and Tonks had this sort of horrified-sick look on her face.

"Harry, you know that I—"

"All for the Greater Good, right, Old Man?" I asked.

He flinched and I felt like I'd just been punched. I wanted to hate him, hurt him. So much pain in my life revolved around him and his machinations, but at the same time he was, well, the closest thing to a Grandfather I had.

"I'm sorry," I said softly.

He looked up at me.

"I wanted you to hurt," I said.

"I understand," he said with a bittersweet smile.

"Is that why...you think he may still be alive?" Tonks asked carefully.

The silencing spell on Ron quavered, his voice was small and distant through it, but held. Hermione just looked green.

"Harry," Dumbledore began.

"Let me finish this next part," I cut them off.

Ron crossed his arms and glared at me. Tonks nodded warily, I noticed that she had her wand out, but she didn't ask me to pass Teddy back.

"As long as I was alive Voldemort couldn't be killed, not for good," I said slowly. "Because I was his Horcrux we were...bound in a way that wizards and witches simply aren't meant to be, but we were. And because of that Prophecy I couldn't risk something like stabbing myself with a basilisk fang would work. In fact, I was pretty sure it wasn't. Fawkes' tears notwithstanding, if what I've read about basilisk venom is accurate I should have been dead instantly. Besides, there was that little ultimatum that Voldemort had put in place and he wasn't going to grandstand this time. He'd kill me quick and clean and final.

"I stopped by Neville long enough to tell him about Nagini just in case Ron and Hermione weren't able to deal with it."

"What do you mean, Ron and me?" Hermione asked. "You—" she stopped and frowned suddenly. "Harry you idiot. Don't tell me you walked in there planning to die."

I shrugged. "It wasn't much as far as plans go, I admit. But since I was walking around with a pesky piece of his soul, and since he was the only one capable of killing me, thus getting rid of said piece of his soul, it wasn't exactly as though I had a whole host of options. I

was also running out of time which is why I didn't tell you or Ron what I was thinking."

"Because you weren't thinking," Hermione said.

"Then please, by all means, tell me what I should have done," I said.

Hermione started to reply, then stopped. "That's so very...very..." she struggled for a moment, "...male of you Harry Potter!" She crossed her arms and sank angrily into the chair and Ron and muttered: "Of all the idiotic things you've done..."

"I went out to the Forest," I said, reaching into my pocket for the stone. It was warm and alive against my fingers as I pulled it out and dropped it onto the tray the tea-things sat on. "The Snitch opened when I told it that I was about to die and this popped out."

Hermione got up from her chair and walked over to the table the tray rested on and began to reach towards it. "Is this really..."

I caught her wrist just before she could pick it up.

"A little curiosity is a dangerous thing, Hermione."

She looked at me with wide eyes, then nodded quickly.

I let her go and she picked it up. "Does it work?" she asked after a moment.

"After a fashion," I said, not looking at Dumbledore. "It doesn't bring someone all the way back, but what it brings is more than the echo-shadows I forced from Voldemort's wand. More than ghosts. It's probably closest to the Diary Memory of Tom Riddle. Based on comment he made, if you can take them at face value and are evil enough to try it, you can get a person to invest enough of themselves in it that a memory could become...real, I guess, though I'm not sure you could select which one would...come across."

I gently took the stone from her fingers and put it in my pocket.

"Who'd you talk to?" Ron asked.

I shook my head.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "You aren't the only one who—"

"Ron," I said softly. "Be quiet before you say something we will both regret."

Ron froze.

"If I thought, even for a minute, that I could destroy it, I would," I said. "But you already tried that. Didn't you, Old Man?"

Dumbledore sighed and nodded. "The Stone cracked when I struck it with the sword to destroy the Horcrux. My further attempts to destroy it achieved nothing."

"Yeah, well, I tossed it into the Forest. Walked into the clearing. As predicted, Voldemort made it quick. I found myself at...a crossroads, complete with a copy of Albus Dumbledore to explain things, and a twisted, pathetic thing to represent the piece of Voldemort's soul, and was presented with a choice. I could move on, or I could...stay. I chose to stay."

Not an hour has gone by since that I wish I had made the other choice.

"Voldemort had Narcissa check to see if I was still alive. She asked if Draco was alive and at the castle, I told her he was. She reported me dead. Voldemort, of course, could not let such a moment go by and hit me with the Cruciatus curse it...didn't hurt."

"It didn't hurt, at all?" McGonagall asked.

"He hit me with it and I didn't feel a thing," I said. "I...understand them, the Unforgiveables, in a way that most people can't, I think. I'm pretty sure that I can't be killed by the killing curse either, though you'll understand that I'm reluctant to actually test that theory."

"Of course," she said dryly.

"He made Hagrid carry me back, I think everything after that was public enough that I don't have to recount the details?"

Ron started to open his mouth. I glared at him, then pointedly looked at the sleeping baby in my arms. He promptly closed it and raised his hand. Hermione saw what he was doing and hers easily beat his into the air.

"Hermione?"

"Your wand, it was broken," she said promptly.

"Complicated," I said, leaning back in my chair. "Voldemort had connected himself to me via Horcrux. When he came back he used my blood, which bound us again. The magic that protected me, Dumbledore had weaved into a complex protection charm over my home that even Voldemort could not penetrate. In fact the first time he touched me, when he possessed Quarrel, it caused him physical harm. Using my blood allowed him to touch me, bound us twice, and ultimately acted as my own anchor in this world which allowed me to come back when I died."

"Sort of an anti-Horcrux?" Ron asked.

"An ingenious way of looking at it, Mr. Weasley," Dumbledore said. He was happy again because he started popping lemon drops again. "Yes, that is exactly how it worked for Harry."

"The wand issue is one step further," I said. "Because while it took him thirteen and a half years to bind us together a second time after the first, it took him thirteen and a half minutes to do it a third time."

"A third?" Hermione asked. "The wands!"

"Exactly, brother wand cores," I said. "Forced to fight each other. The first time he marked me as his equal. The second balanced his anchor with one of mine so we were equal. But my wand beat his wand, forced it to regurgitate past spells, which meant in the end that I was more equal than him. It had me, but also...pieces of him. My courage and his skill, perhaps. Which meant any wand I drew against Voldemort would be over-powered against him, which is why Lucius Malfoy's wand broke when he used against me back in July."

"Dumbledore had planned for the Elder Wand to lose its power with him. Planned his own death with Severus casting the death curse. What he didn't plan on was Draco disarming Dumbledore, making

him the new owner of the wand, even though he never touched it. When I beat Draco in the skirmish in Malfoy Manor the wand passed to me, though I didn't know that then either. When Voldemort drew it against me I was using Draco's wand. Not only was it over-powered against Voldemort, but the Elder Wand knew that Voldemort wasn't its rightful bearer. Which meant that his spell bounced yet again."

"And your wand?" Hermione repeated.

"I used the Elder Wand to repair it," I said simply.

She sat back and nodded in a satisfied way.

"Uh, Harry?" Ron asked.

I looked at him.

"You're impressive as all hell when you fight," he said, "but I honestly didn't see anything over-powered, as you put it."

"Only against Voldemort, Ron, only against Voldemort," I pulled out my holly wand and cradled it in one hand. "Against anyone else this wand is as good as any other, though I like to think it better than most."

"And the Elder Wand?" Dumbledore asked. "What shall become of it?"

"I have it, Voldemort's too, for that matter," I said. "I sort of spilled the whole story last night for everyone to hear so it's not like I can just hide it away."

Dumbledore closed his eyes and sort of slumped in his painted chair. "So it goes on."

"Yeah, well, I could have told you that," I said. "What I have, though, are two problems. First, I tossed the Stone in the Forest. I just happened to pick it up earlier today while looking for skipping stones on the banks of Hogwarts Lake. Any ideas?"

Dumbledore sat back in his chair and his eyes had that gleam I'd seen before when he was presented with an interesting problem or was about to perform some truly outstanding magic. "The story of

the Peverell brothers meeting Death is, I believe, simply a story. A legend, if you will, attached to a trio of extremely powerful magical artifacts created by a trio of brilliant wizard brothers who delved deeper in dangerous magics than was wise. Like many such objects they want to be used by a hand fitting and powerful enough to use them."

I stared at him for a moment, then said in a dry voice, "Oh look, Headmaster, it followed me home, can I keep it?"

Ron snorted and Hermione laughed lightly. Tonks smiled slightly and McGonagall's lips twitched upwards. I'm not sure if my poor heart was ready for another McGonagall smile.

"I believe you had a second issue?"

"Yeah," I said. "Kingsley appointed me to Chief Auror. Since a couple of Death Eaters got away I figured we'd raid a couple of locations I know they used. One of them was the Gaunt Cottage. Nothing in there, but we couldn't get in until I talked to the snake Morfin had nailed to the front door."

Dumbledore stiffened. "You talked to it?"

I nodded. "It wasn't very conversational. About as articulate as Morfin was in those memories you showed me. Since this morning I've noticed a couple of snakes hiding in pictures or carved into walls. I was able to bypass whatever passwords there are protecting the Slytherin common room, the Slytherin Head Student quarters, and this office, using parseltongue."

"What password?" Dumbledore asked.

"In Hogwarts? Just telling it to open," I said. "The Gaunt Cottage? Well, Voldemort wasn't exactly known for creative passwords. It was the same as the one in the Chamber of Secrets to open the basilisk's nest. 'Speak to me Slytherin, Greatest of the Hogwarts Four'."

"Are you certain that Tom—" he paused.

"Killed me?" I asked. "Oh yeah, dead center with the ol' AK. Let me tell you, if someone says that it doesn't hurt they're lying. It felt like I

was kicked by a centaur...or maybe it only hurts if you survive it because if you don't you don't feel anything at all."

"A probable inference," Dumbledore said. "I am unable to aid you since I cannot recall my death, but you might see if there is a ghost in Hogwarts with which you could compare notes."

"As interesting as this is, does this mean that Harry's still a Horcrux or not?" Tonks asked.

"Not, I would think," Dumbledore said. "To the best of my knowledge it is not an ability you regularly used, Harry, is this correct?"

I nodded.

"Then it stands to reason that you may have retained a partial ability, perhaps, say, the words you used most frequently or have heard spoken, perhaps."

That...actually made some sense.

"Thank you," I told him. I stood and carefully passed the sleeping Teddy Tonks back to his mother. "There you go, Tonks," I said, forcing myself to keep my tone light. "The whole story, all the secrets... I wish you the joy of them." I turned and walked out of the office without looking back, half-hoping for a fight.

The Elder Wand strapped to me left arm tingled in anticipation.

A/N: I had a lot of trouble with this since most of it is a recounting of what everyone who's read the books already knows (sorry), but it really had to be done to get all the people who simply had to know up to speed. Which doesn't mean I might not have to do it again whenever I decide that Harry needs to spill the whole story to the press...or maybe I can just convince my borrowed!-Hermione to write an authorized history of the whole mess.



## Chapter 6: Shadow of the Wind

There's a door to dreams

And it always lets you in

But with a silent scream

All the nightmares must begin

Still you chase what you can't see

Like death and pain and sin

And the Shadow of the Wind

The Shadow of the Wind

-Black Sabbath-

Savage waved his wand and the door of the safe-house exploded into splinters. Domesday, leading with a shield spell, barreled through right on the tail-end of the explosion and I was right behind her with Tonks behind me followed by the rest of the team.

Domesday crumpled without a sound as she was struck with something that left a blazing yellow trail through the air. Apparently it wasn't fatal because one of the people in the room sent a familiar green-toned curse at her fallen form. I managed to summon an end-table over to block it, but two more Death Eaters came pouring down the stairs and a door flew open to reveal another pair. The whole thing had been a trap and we were bottled up inside the first room and our own wards wouldn't let us disapparate or portkey out.

Savage was screaming for us to get out. Watson, who was actually doing what my job technically called for by coordinating the Auror strike teams, was telling everyone that we had blundered into a trap. Percy was droning about dementors in Dublin and a giant in Gloucester. Right now Percy's information didn't help, Watson's was obvious, and Savage's... actually his was a good call since they were just as trapped in this building as we were. If we could get out we could just burn the damn thing down with them in it and not let them out unless they surrendered.

Unfortunately that plan was reliant on us getting out.

I blocked spells from two Death Eaters and hit a third with conjured ropes around neck and head. Higher than I had planned, but it left him open and I hit him with a stunner. Someone else had as well, and another person had used a gold-colored spell that zipped across the room while dodging back and forth at sharp angles that made it hard to counter.

I got under one of Domesday's arms and then Tonks was beside me with the other as I banished a sofa at a pair of Death Eaters. One blasted it to shards and his companion transfigured them into knives and sent them back at us. A swish of my wand redirected them towards the two by the stairs while Tonks used something that shot a beam of blue-white light from her wand.

A Death Eater got a shield up, and for a moment the normally transparent magical shield glowed as the blue-white light crackled across it leaving the scent of ozone in its wake. The knives disappeared into a reddish-brown powder as the Death Eater by the stairs turned them to rust in less time than it takes an eye to blink. A flick of his companion's wand and the dust flashed in a brilliant display of light and heat, and then I was pitched to the ground as something like a bludger only with a lot more force hit me below the left shoulder blade.

"Hello Harry," a cold voice hissed behind me.

I twisted over, wand raised, to find the room was untouched by the fight—no, it wasn't untouched by the fighting, it was a different room entirely. I had been in a living room of a fairly normal-appearing (at least on the outside) house in muggle suburb of Edinburgh. Now I was in a small private library. Couches, stuffed chairs, and a muggle entertainment center were replaced by a wooden desk, a solitary hard-backed chair, and shelves of leather-bound books. There was only one window high in one wall unlike the bay window, the floor was wood instead of carpeted, the wood-work of the bookcases was dark unlike the lighter colors used in the first room. The Death Eaters were gone, as were my Aurors...

And standing across from me was Lord Voldemort.

It was a Voldemort like I had only seen in memories, from before his resurrection when he still looked human. He was older than the Tom Riddle of the Diary, possibly even older than the Voldemort that had worked at Borgin' and Burke's—it was harder to tell with wizards and witches than muggles since we age so much more slowly and have better ways of concealing our ages—but he looked to be right around the age he came to Dumbledore even though he felt older than that. Which meant, of course, that he could be anywhere from twenty-seven to fifty-three—only this didn't feel like any memory I'd ever seen and there was no way a Voldemort that young should be able to recognize me.

"Voldemort," I said with false cheerfulness and a confidence I didn't feel. "You're looking remarkably healthy for someone who's dead."

"Harry, Harry," he chuckled softly, "did you really think that you would be so easily rid of me? Did you believe that the Horcruxes were really my only line of defense?"

"Nice try," I said, forcing my voice to remain level. Horcruxes? Was that what the plural was? Everyone else had used Horcruxes but Hermione had argued about that at least a dozen times with Ron. "You almost had me there for a moment, I admit. More likely you're just another one of the real Lord Voldemort's minions dressed up with a little polyjuice enhancement, or maybe a very clever illusion."

He looked annoyed, then shrugged indifferently and pulled out a wand. A very familiar wand. My wand. "I suppose it does not matter anymore," he said, twirling the wand theatrically. "You killed me and—"

"You killed yourself," I said.

"Don't interrupt, Harry, it's rude," he said. "In every war, all the damage, all the death, is always the fault of the defender, Harry. If they didn't resist, if they allowed the conqueror to have what he wished, there would be no conflict, no destruction. No death..."

He waved my wand and one entire wall of bookshelves disappeared revealing that the entire wall was a window looking down from a great height. I was startled to find myself looking down on Hogwarts as it must have been the night before while the battle raged.

"In a very real way," Voldemort said as he moved to stand next to me and watch the battle, "this is entirely your fault. If you had joined me when I offered in your first year, but no, even then you could not. Perhaps blame should rightly be affixed on your mother. If she had stood aside the curse would not have rebounded upon myself."

I started to draw my wand, but my wand was missing from its spring-holster on my right forearm.

Voldemort smirked and swirled my wand and the illusion of the window disappeared even as I drew his from the holster on my left arm. Another swirl jerked my arm to the right so that my disarming spell missed him entirely. "You dare to draw that wand against me?" he cried. Another motion and I couldn't move.

He crossed to me in three great strides. "I confess I do not know what to do with you, Harry Potter. Do I strike you down for your continual interference in my plans...or do I thank you?"

Thank me? I wanted to ask.

"Oh yes," he said as if he'd heard the question. "The Horcruxi were never intended to be more than a temporary measure, though one of far greater effectiveness and power than hitherto imagined from such a...limited Artifact. Splitting the soul splits the power of the soul. Perhaps that was known to the Ancients and why those that utilized them relied upon a solitary device...perhaps that knowledge was destroyed in the attempts to purge the world of knowledge of such devices.

"My thanks are indeed in order; for you, Harry Potter, have healed me. You have made whole again what I had rent asunder. Foolish, I admit, it was for me to think I had returned to my full power simply by returning to a corporeal form. But all that has changed now."

"I don't suppose you can go into a long rant about your goals and plans," I said.

Forget about what I said about a smiling Professor McGonagall. A chuckling Voldemort jumped to second on my list of 'scariest things in the life of Harry Potter' list, the top, of course, was left open in the chance I came across something more terrifying still.

"No, Harry," he said. "I have enjoyed our little chat but it is, however, time for you to be getting back. Pleasant dreams, Harry Potter." He raised my wand and pointed it at me. "Oh, and be sure to roll."

Another flash of light and I slammed face-first into something hard that rasped across my face.

"Harry!"

Someone was screaming my name and I was on the floor. I rolled onto my back (easier and faster to get your wand back into things than pushing yourself up) wand—Voldemort's wand even though I had had mine before my little trip to wherever—coming up to cast a shield charm when the carpeted floor where I had been cratered under a spell that seemed to transfigure the floor-boards into a miniature chain of volcanoes.

A body landed on me and Bellatrix Lestrange thrust her face into mine. "Harry," she said the mocking-baby voice I've heard her use in battle strangely absent. She grinned widely as her wand glowed with white light where it's pointed at my face. "You're having a bad dream, Harry," she informed me before looking up at the battle.

Savage was down, so was Domesday again, and Tonks was huddled with a pair of wizards I didn't know, desperately trying to keep themselves and the two downed Aurors shielded while Travers and Watson tried to organize reinforcements.

Bellatrix glanced at me, looked to where I was looking, then grinned and cast a curse at Tonks. Tonks flicked a shield at it, but the spell seemed to be more material than energy and passed through it with little problem, catching Tonks full in the face with something corrosive.

"Harry," Bellatrix said, turning back to me as she raised her wand, her other hand on my shoulder pushing me down so that my head slammed into the floor. Pain blossomed at the back of my head and stars burst before my eyes, but I was faster than her curse and I only needed to be able to point my wand at a part of her body.

"Harry," she said again. Why the hell did she need to keep repeating my name?

It wasn't a spell I'd normally consider using but Bellatrix was a special case and watching Tonks' face and neck get eaten away by the acidic spell she'd just used definitely made the list of most horrible things I'd seen. I grinned back at her and began the invocation for the one spell I thought I'd never use.

"Avada Kedav—" the scene twisted again and I adjusted my aim as I continued the second-to-last syllable of the incantation. Only it wasn't Bellatrix above me anymore, and it wasn't Voldemort.

Tonks' face was pale. The kind of pale that comes from realizing just how close you came to getting your fool head ripped off by a pissed-off mother Hungarian Horntail's spiked tail—or almost catching a killing curse—only with the slightly greenish cast that you only really get when you're dead and the body has begun to decay but before it bloats. Her eyes flicked towards the glowing tip of Voldemort's wand, and the killing curse that was waiting there in anticipation of being completed, before flicking back to me. "You sounded like you were having a nightmare," she said, sounding remarkably composed for someone who was one syllable away from death.

Of course, if I had come that close to death I'd probably have sounded just as composed. Partly, of course, of just how many times I'd actually been that close, but mostly because right now I wouldn't care. It probably wasn't the healthiest of attitudes for someone who just might have to come that close again and once again pull a miracle out of his arse and save the world...but I couldn't bring myself to care about that either.

I shook the wand, wordlessly dispelling the uncast curse. "I almost killed you just now," I observed.

"But you didn't," she said

I didn't respond as I sat up and pushed the covers aside. Access to Severus' private room or no, I wasn't ready to sleep there yet. I hadn't taken the guest room in case Tonks had decided to come back down—as she apparently had. Severus' wand was on the end table next to the couch, Voldemort's wand—which I now held in my hand—had been in a holster under the cushions. The Elder wand was currently in a holster magicked onto my left thigh. I could feel it still there, and Severus' was in its proper place. I turned over my pillow. The holster stuck to it, where I'd had my wand, was empty.

"Are you okay?"

"I—" I hesitated and then shook my head. "I'm fine," I said shortly. "Bad dream, you woke me just as I was cursing Bellatrix."

"Do you normally go around cursing people in your sleep?" she asked. Her tone was light, joking, but I could hear the concern about it.

"First time, so far as I know," I said. "I suppose you can't even call it that since I didn't actually do anything. Teddy?"

"You didn't wake him," she said.

"Your dad?"

"Still hanging on," she said. "We stopped the spell from propagating, the Healers' say, and they managed to get rid of the rest of it which they weren't expect," She breathed deeply and let out an angry sigh, "but the magical signature is still there. They're shoving potions down his throat every ten minutes...they think if he can make it until the signature wears off they might bring in some muggle experts, see if they can repair the damage that way since magic isn't accomplishing anything productive."

"Dark Magic, same reason they couldn't reattach George's ear," I said.

She nodded.

There was one of those long awkward silences where both people think they should say something but neither can think of what. Finally I said I was going for a walk and Tonks stammered something and disappeared into the guest room.

Thirty minutes later I was standing on the West Wall, looking down on the grounds from the battlements. The damage didn't look as bad from up here, but I knew that was only partially an illusion. The grounds were still patch-worked with black blotches where naked dirt didn't reflect moonlight and starlight as well as grass, but since the battle, since, even, my last walk through the grounds, much of the damage had already been repaired.

"Hello, Harry, can't say I expected to find you up here."

I pulled my heavy cloak more tightly around me. I could feel the sun behind me. It hadn't risen yet, but I could feel the first streaks of grey starting to press against the sky below the Eastern horizon. "Where did you expect to find me, Sir Nicholas?" I asked.

"The corridors were always your favorite haunts," the ghost replied. "I can't say that I ever heard of you walking the ramparts before."

"I felt a change was in order," I said, trying not to smile at his little joke. Sirius and Fred would have loved it, Remus too, probably. For me it hit a little too close to home.

"Nothing half so melancholy a battle lost, save for a battle won," he said at length.

"Pardon?"

"Wellington's words, not my own," Sir Nicholas said. "But apt, I think."

"I'm not sure that 'melancholy' is the word I'd use," I muttered. "Besides, I thought you were dead long before he was born."

"I was, dead, I mean," Sir Nicholas said flustered. "I volunteered."

"Volunteered?"

"It helps those that stay behind to have an older ghost around to help them...adapt," Sir Nicholas said.

I frowned at him, "I thought muggles can't become ghosts."

"They can't, not fully," he said. "That does not mean that those with cause don't try to stay around, much the same way we stay around."

"Voldemort, Tom Riddle, feared death above all things," I whispered. "Did he try and stay, become a ghost?"

Sir Nicholas shook his head. "No, Harry. The Ghosts of Hogwarts, well, the only people to have died on the grounds and in the castle



to have returned as a ghost were Professor Binns and Myrtle. For the longest time we all believed that it was impossible, that the magical concentrations—learning is of the living after all, not the dead—prevented it. Binns took us all by surprise. And Myrtle's transition was...difficult."

Meaning she wasn't quite right in the head when she died. Or maybe it came with being stuck in puberty for fifty years.

Yeah, that was probably it.

Binns, it was said, went to sleep in the staff room one night and when he woke up for classes the next morning he left his body behind without even noticing.

"Too quickly," Nicholas was murmuring beside me.

"Too quickly?"

"Too quickly," he repeated. "This time tomorrow the grounds will have been restored, the day after, the halls. Next year, a memorial will be raised, within ten it'll be only a memory shared by those that remain that most have tried to put behind them. In a century it will be only a matter for the ghosts, school textbooks, and Hogwarts herself.

"And then the cycle will start anew."

"How easily we forget," I whispered.

"And a good thing it is," Nicholas said.

I looked at him for the first time.

"Always remembering—leave that for us ghosts, Harry, we've time enough for it. Best that the living mourn their dead and then get on with living again. Leave the sorrow and sadness for those who are past such things."

I snorted but didn't say anything.

"You might consider watching the sunrise, Harry," Sir Nicholas said after a while. "The Astronomy Tower has an excellent vantage."

It should, it had the tallest tower, but Nick knew that and I didn't feel like pointing out the obvious.

"It will do you good," he pressed, "to dwell on the new. To remember that things—that life—continues."

Somehow I doubted that, but I nodded to him, said: "I'll do that," turned, and walked off the wall.

Hogwarts has a lot of secrets. Some of them probably haven't been known since the Founders died. Many of them, at least in my experience, are quite scary, waiting to kill and/or eat any unsuspecting students. A few of them are rather fun, there was one girl I recall who kept getting boys to step onto the girl dorm stairs once Ron and I had accidentally discovered what happened when a guy did that. Another one was the charm that slowed falls from the towers or walls. Exactly when it had been done was anyone's guess, but pretty much everyone agreed it was to cut down the rates of death by misadventure in the ranks of Gryffindor and Slytherin students. This ranked only slightly above an effort to cut down the suicide rate of fifth and seventh years confronted by the O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. exams.

Unlike the floo or portkeys this was a form of travel that I could keep my feet under me at the end. The real trick was to pretend you were in a lift and wait to come to a full and complete stop before stepping off. Lee had sworn that it was possible to run down the walls so long as you didn't stop—though it helped if you remembered to make the turn at the bottom—but it was one of the many things he and the twins had told me that I'd never felt tempted to try.

Actually, I'd never felt tempted to try seeing if the slow-falling thing was really real either and a part of me felt disappointed when it became clear that it was.

I crossed through the castle proper without seeing a soul—ghost or otherwise. To get to the Astronomy Tower from where I was I had to cross an inner courtyard, and that was where I found Firenze was resting. He looked better than the last time I'd seen him, but given that he'd been practically disemboweled at the time I suppose anything was better.

"Firenze," I said.

"Harry Potter," he replied.

"I thought you'd gone back to the forest."

"I am welcome again in the herd, this is true," he said.

"But..."

"Your healers are better," he said bluntly.

Honest, blunt, not a whiff of the usual enigmatic stuff about stars or planets—

"Mars is bright tonight," he said.

Damn.

"Its morning," I pointed out.

"Yes," he said. "Very well, Mars is bright this morning."

Mars wasn't even visible.

"It's always bright," I said.

"It remains bright," he said with forced patience, "but it has begun to wane."

"That's good, right?" I asked.

"It is what is," he said. "Venus is dark."

"Is that like Mars is bright?"

He turned from the stars to look down at me, and his tail gave a little flick of impatience that brought a pained look to his face. "Jupiter is ascending," he told me solemnly.

"Thank you," I said, mentally promising to give his warning all the consideration it deserved.

He nodded to me and I nodded back before continuing across the inner courtyard to the Astronomy Tower.

The tower is the biggest in Hogwarts. Not just the tallest—which it is—but also the widest. A long staircase winds its way up along the inside of the tower wall. Doors set into the inner wall give access to a number of chambers, starting with the Star Chamber set three levels below ground (the dungeons proper don't connect to the Tower). There was a room filled with the lattice-like shelves for scrolls that contained numerous star charts. A floor up from that was a large room filled with brass astrolabes and sextants, crystal globes showing the celestial sphere, or containing miniature solar systems and galaxies, and numerous other instruments I couldn't identify. A monstrous telescope, so wide that two people couldn't put their arms around it, was in a room two levels below the top of the tower. The room had been magically widened so that the telescope could move around, and it had no problems observing the heavens despite the fact that there was no window to be had. The room above it had a ceiling that could be magicked to look like the sky from anywhere on the world at any time of the year. It was usually used during inclement weather that not even the magic of the Astronomy Tower's observation deck could handle, but because it had a quasi 'zoom' feature it was sometimes used to explore the relative position of stars to each other.

The trapdoor that normally covered the stairs and kept snow from falling in during the winter—and rain from falling in the rest of the year—was already open, so I walked up onto the roof of the Astronomy Tower into the rapidly lightening dawn.

"Hello, Harry."

"Lavender," I said, taking in my former classmate.

She sat in a wheelchair with a tartan blanket folded over and around her legs. Her skin was pale, except where it was dark under her eyes, and her hair was pulled back in a bun that her ghost would come back from the beyond to haunt a mortician for if she were to be caught dead wearing it. It was her eyes that told me she hadn't had any better luck sleeping that I'd had.

She turned away without saying anything more and turned to face east. The sky was starting to marble and a thin line of gold seemed to trace the distant boundary between earth and sky.

"Vati always liked to watch the sun rise," she said as the golden ball began its ascent to the heavens, if only for a day.

"I didn't know," I said. Mostly I didn't care. Lavender and Parvati were—had been—the biggest gossips in our year, if not the school, and were as obsessed with Divination as Ron was with the Cannons. It hadn't left us with a whole lot in common.

"George contacted me last evening, about the uniforms you want."

"George?" I asked. "Percy got started on it that quickly?"

"You're going to need uniforms in the coming days," she said. "George seemed to be having as much trouble sleeping as I was."

I didn't know how to respond to that so I didn't bother trying.

"Why did you tell him to contact me?"

"Who else was I going to have him ask?" I returned. "Tell him to go to one of the existing shops where he'd get the same types of designs that have existed for the past two hundred years. Try to get them to work with George, and if those business are as secretive as the rest of the wizarding world seems to be—"

"More so," Lavender said.

"—then that would be impossible. And quite frankly I don't know if any of them are capable of producing the volume that's going to be needed."

Lavender didn't reply until the sun was half-way up. "Parvati was so excited when you asked her to the Ball..."

"I was fourteen, Lavender," I said, "a contestant in a tournament I wanted no part in. Actually, at the time I was pretty sure that the whole thing was a plot to get me killed—which it was, though it happened to be a byproduct of the primary plot for once—and, quite honestly—"

"It was a social occasion, and you never did like those..." she said, then added, "or was it just large numbers of people?"

"It isn't people that I have problems with," I muttered. "It's the bloody hero-worship."

"I know," she said, and then her voice grew iron, "but you're going to have to learn to at least be able to function around it, at a minimum. For one thing you just saved an awful lot of people when you killed that snake-faced bastard. In the process you just happened to kill off one of the most powerful Dark Lords in centuries. If even half the rumors in Hogwarts have some glimmer of truth in them then once those stories get out you're going to seem even more heroic. And you aren't going to be able to hide in your office and pretend it isn't real.

"At least half, probably more, of your job isn't going to be in the office doing paperwork or out in the field chasing down Death Eaters, Harry. Do you want to know what it is? It's going to be at lunches," she barreled on before I could tell her that 'no, I don't really want to know' or 'that's what I have Travers for' or some other glib comment, "at parties, at the Wizengamot; making alliances and trading favors to get the legislation you want passed, or get the funds you need approved, or any one of the countless other things you're going to need in order for the Aurors to be successful. You're going to have to learn to play the very games you despise, learn to play them fast and learn to play them well, or you are going to fail just as badly as if you'd failed the night before last."

For some reason that seemed to really scare her. "Is there something I need to know?" I asked cautiously.

"No," she said tightly.

"Fair enough."

I turned back to watching the sun, surrounded by pinks and purples and soft yellows and oranges.

"He visited my house," Lavender said softly after a minute of silence. "Ginny had the presence of mind to use her DA coin to signal that

the Ministry had fallen. Dean and Justin both escaped before their homes were raided..."

"Still no word about Justin," I said. "On the upside we found one person yesterday that they'd reported as dead, so..." I shrugged.

Lavender breathed sharply, "well there's that, at least." She fell quiet for a moment before continuing. "My parents had made plans to flee. Dad's a muggle but Mum isn't, she's a squib from a really prominent family—not that they want that little fact known—and, well, she really wasn't willing to take chances. But then He showed up, before we could leave the country, insisted that I return to Hogwarts, made it all seem like it was this great dinner party, but you could feel the hate whenever he glanced at Dad or Mum..."

"How are they?" I asked.

"They're okay, better now that He's dead."

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry that I was such a prat at the Yule Ball. I'm sorry that I never took the chance to apologize to Parvati...and I'm sorry that she's dead," I said. The first two sounded sincere but felt hollow and empty when I spoke them. The last, well, it didn't feel quite real yet.

Neither had Sirius, at first. Ginny wasn't at all.

"Thank you," she said.

After a moment I heard the chair move and turned to see Lavender pulling a bag into her lap and pulling out several sheets of the heavy paper that Dean liked to use for his sketches.

"I have few designs for you to look at."

"Already?" I asked.

"Yes," she said rolling to the north side of the tower and began magicking them onto the battlements. "You are going to need at least seven different uniforms."

"Seven?" I asked.

"Seven," she repeated. "Ceremonial robes, ceremonial armor, evening robes, dress robes, working robes, utility robes, and finally the set of battle-armor that you wanted."

I winced. "Do I want to know how expensive this is going to be?"

"It depends, do you want quality materials and good work?"

"Yes."

"Do you want everything to be of Weasley Wizard Wheezes Shield-Wear?"

"Or better, yes," I said.

"Do you want them in a timely fashion?"

"Considering who is still out there, definitely."

"Then yes, this is going to be expensive."

"Fine, I'll get Percy to explain it to Kingsley. The worst he can do is fire me. I will leave if he won't give me the tools to do the job and he knows it," I said grimly. "So, tell me about these uniforms. How quickly can we have them?"

"For starters, we have to prioritize," Lavender said. "You'll need Ceremonial robes, but probably no earlier than your first appearance before the Wizengamot. I don't know the Minister's plans, but that may be very soon. On the other hand I can't think of a reason why everyone else will need them all at once so we can wait on most of those."

"Ceremonial armor—even less need for those right now so that can wait."

"What type of armor are we talking about?" I asked.

"It'll depend on what's available; dragonhide, probably. I don't know those kinds of material that well so I'll either have to shop that part out to someone established for it or the Aurors can deal with them directly."



"I'll stick with you for now," I said. "One less person to go see, one less thing to do..."

"And you know I won't cheat you."

"That too."

"Okay, for the ceremonial armor I'm still debating whether the standard armor, only polished up or something, can go over the ceremonial robes, or if we need separate armor or something else entirely. Polished, silver-washed steel or something like that. I'll come up with an array of choices and let you—or whoever you put in charge—choose. Might want to check whatever regulations there are, it might be that ceremonial robes will work just as well."

"Which would be a definite savings," I observed. "Put in a budget line for it, I'll check and cross it off if we don't need it. That way I can point to it as proof of my financial responsibility when Kingsley and whoever he sends from accounting shows up."

Lavender snorted.

"Evening dress, there are no major parties that you have to attend are scheduled before the funerals. Funerals call for dress robes, not evening-wear. The earliest formal party that I expect will be the summer-solstice, assuming the Ministry gives its usual ball—it usually hosts four, one on each of the solstices and equinoxes—in which case we have the better part of two months. Someone may choose to host something sooner, but I doubt it.

I tried not to let my dismay at the idea show.

"Dress robes," Lavender pressed on. "As I said, you're all going to need them for the funerals."

"Not the Ceremonial robes?"

She shook her head, "Too ostentatious. You need something somber. Dress robes, dark purple velvet armbands, bands over shields, reversed wands and swords, things like that."

Swords? I decided not to ask and instead nodded, "And the last two sets?"

"The first is a set of everyday working robes, which are just as they sound. The second are utility robes for when you know you are going into trouble. The utility uniforms will serve as a foundation for the battle armor, whenever it's completed, and the working robes will have a thin vest of dragonhide, or similar material, under them."

"Sounds good," I said.

"Not so fast, don't you want to see what I've come up with?"

"Uh, sure," I said. I probably didn't sound terribly enthusiastic, but then, I wasn't terribly enthusiastic. On the other hand talking about it seemed to help Lavender deal and listening to her drone about clothes had to be better than listening to my own thoughts.

Lavender pointed her wand at one drawing and the illustration leapt off the page and grew until it was maybe half life-sized. "The utilities are going to be a dark, padded jumpsuit—Weasley Shield-Wear of course—with reinforcements at high-stress areas, elbows, knees, and the like. The reinforcements and all the areas left exposed by the armor will be double-enchanted."

"They aren't robes," I noted.

"Do you know how hard it is to wear armor over robes?" Lavender asked.

No, but I'd take her word for it. "Some of the Aurors aren't going to like it," I said instead. "You know how uptight some can get about anything different."

"Tough," Lavender said bluntly. She waved her wand, returning the image to where it was and enlarging a second that looked remarkably like me wearing dark blue robes with scarlet trim. "You can forget your suggestion of dark green. For one thing green is traditionally a color of Healers and Herbalists. For another scarlet and gold have been the traditional colors of the Aurors for centuries, trimming dark green with either makes you look like you're dressing for a Christmas party or a Catapults game."

"So dark blue?" I asked.

"Midnight blue," she corrected.

"Does it have to be blue?" I asked.

"Green, as I said, is out. Purple is the color of the Ministry itself and really doesn't lend well to traditional scarlet of the Aurors though it works reasonably well with gold. Orange will make you all look like you're all Chudley Cannon fans—Ron may enjoy that, but nobody else will and it'll be hard getting a shade dark enough to get the effect that you want. Yellow and red are both right out because of how visible they are, as are gold, silver, and white. You removed black. Brown isn't any good, nor is grey though it'd be somewhat easier than brown if you insisted on it. I suppose I could use a really dark red base, one so dark that it'd be nearly black, but the shade that would work best was the same used by Grindelwald's Knights of Walpurgis and the ones that work less well are close enough to it to have the same effect."

She crossed her arms and looked at me.

The Knights of Walpurgis were Grindelwald's equivalent of Voldemort's Death Eaters though they weren't as given to random acts of violence, muggle torture, or casual sociopathy. I shrugged, "Blue it is, then. I didn't mean to question you, I was just curious."

She turned back to the illusion and began pointing out design features. "Aurors and below will retain scarlet trim at the hem, cuffs, the inside and the edges of the high stand-up collar, and along the shoulders. Senior Aurors have crimson trim in the same places. The uniform is gathered at the waist by a black belt for carrying potion vials and other supplies.

"In addition to the Shield-Wear charms, there will be environmental charms so it will shed water and be comfortable in anything from just below freezing to ninety degree heat. Two matching cloaks, a light one with stronger environmental charms for summer-wear and a heavier one with the same types of charms for in winter, are included. Under the robes will be a vest of dragonhide protecting the vital areas, under which is worn a long silk tunic to provide a little added protection and keep the vest from chaffing."

"Silk is protective?" I asked skeptically.

"Against low-level magic especially if it's passive magic," Lavender said. She gave me a look, "You really don't know anything about clothing or fashion, do you?"

"Not much," I admitted.

"Hmph, well, at least you decided to hire someone who does," she muttered. "Yes, silk is innately, though only mildly, protective against magic."

"And...cloaks?" I asked. "If the...environmental charms, I think you called them, are so effective—"

"Because they are expected, because conditions might exist which render the charms ineffective or insufficient for the weather at hand, because extra protection spells can be woven into them, and because they'll look good," she said. "May I?"

I nodded, "Sure, go ahead."

She gestured at the sleeves, "The sleeves will carry the appropriate rank insignia, if any—chevrons pointing down for the Aurors I assume, probably an emblem of some kind on the shoulders instead for the Senior Aurors."

"You haven't decided?" I asked. She seemed so on top of everything else as far as the uniforms were concerned.

"I don't know," she shrugged. "The magical community has never really had a standing army or the like outside of the minions of the odd dark lord. That was even true during the Goblin rebellions. The last thing you want is something based off current wizard fashions—if I read your directives correctly, that is—so I'm drawing most of my inspiration from what I remember seeing of muggle military uniforms. I figure you can pin your shields to your breasts, but that only goes so far. Having rank insignia would allow you to recognize relative standings more easily, which will be important when you begin expanding and everyone doesn't, at least initially, know everyone else."

"Of course it also lets the bad guys see our ranks as well," I said.

Lavender frowned, "That's the breaks, Harry. Is being identifiable to the civilians and yourselves outweigh the cost of being identifiable to the bad guys?"

"In this case...probably," I admitted. "Especially since you're right about my plans to rapidly expand. Right now the force is small enough that everyone knows everyone else, and they've worked together for years. That's going to change, at least in the short-term."

She nodded and tapped the illusory figure. The solid red stripes on the arms faded into red outlines.

"Outlines, then;" she said. "They are somewhat less recognizable, but enough to be helpful. Insignia to match trim color...except the Senior Aurors will need midnight blue rank insignia to stand out against the crimson at the shoulder seam. Let's put a gold emblem on the collars, the shield and crossed sword and wand would do nicely, I think."

"Sounds good," I said, as I began edging for the door.

"Not so fast, don't you want to hear about the dress robes?"

"Sure, Lavender," I sighed.

"Last one, Harry, promise," she said, giving me a small smile. "I'm still putting the finishing touches on the ceremonial robes."

"Have you slept at all?" I asked.

"Have you?" she returned. She jabbed her wand, angrily dismissing the robed figure and bringing forth another. "The gauzy frills around neck and at the cuffs went out of style last century, thank Morgana. Current fashion calls for a robe that's open in front to the waist over a shirt and something approximating a waist-coat, with a really elaborate, really gauzy, cravat-like thing. The whole thing reassembles a miss-mash of muggle academic regalia, late Georgian-era dress, and something that only the French would have worn—the really old-school French, and not even most of them would touch this. In addition there are under-robos and..." she paused and glanced at me, apparently saw that I did not care one bit, and finished with a sigh, "other things."

I nodded at her knowingly. The image didn't have any of those things, though the robes did look pretty smart.

"This," she continued, gesturing towards the image, "does away with all that. I actually designed it first and derived the working uniform from it. It starts the same as the working uniform—with much better material and richer colors, of course."

"Of course."

"Noticeable differences between the two," she continued as if I hadn't spoken. "The blood-stripe in scarlet or crimson, depending on rank, that runs from hem up the outside of each leg to the waist, which is now secured by a white dress belt. Above the belt the robe is fitted snug and double-breasted. The buttons are decorative, not functional, made of gold, and bear the shield and crossed sword and wand. The actual opening runs along the outside of the right column of button from the waist, cuts over after the last button, and continues up to the collar. It closes left over right and is sealed with magic, while edge is trimmed with scarlet or crimson as appropriate."

"It looks like an off-center lightning bolt," I said flatly.

Lavender looked at it and tilted her head to one side. "I guess, maybe...sort of," she said doubtfully. "I got the idea for the flap from an American show on the telly, something with a spaceship. You think it's too much?"

I shrugged.

"Hmm, well, I'll think about it," she said after a moment and gestured at the hovering image with her wand. "It has the same high collar with the gold shield, sword, and wand insignia as on the working uniforms.

"A sash of appropriate color runs from under the right epaulette to left hip where it is attached to the sword belt, if worn. Full-sized awards are affixed to the sash."

"You think I'm going to need a sword?"

Lavender shook her head. "It's an option, Harry. At allows you to dress up a little more or a little less depending on occasion and circumstance."

"Fine," I said. "Just make sure that there is a way of carrying our wands that leaves us free access, and that the dress robes are loose enough that we can fight in them effectively if called to do so."

She nodded. "Anything else?"

"Not that I can think of," I said. "Just, when you go looking for someone to make the armor and swords, don't go to the goblins."

Lavender frowned, "Goblins have incredible craftsmanship at very reasonable prices. If you want me to look elsewhere it's going to cost a lot more, especially if you want me to get the same quality."

"I know, but goblins have their own way of looking at things and I don't want to get caught in a deal that we may regret later."

Lavender nodded absently, "I wonder...you know, Harry, we could just have replica blades made. They'd look real enough but wouldn't actually be useable as swords, and I'm pretty sure we could get a fast delivery of them if we looked in the muggle world."

I shook my head, "A sword with a fake blade is about as useful as one of the Twins' fake wands if it comes down to a fight."

"You talked to Neville about that snake?"

"No," I said, "But I've used a sword before in a fight. They're sharp."

Lavender rolled her eyes at me.

"Good idea about the muggle world though," I said, "maybe they have people you can order a bunch from in a hurry."

She frowned, "Very well. I'll see what I can do."

"Good, can I leave this whole project in your hands?" I asked.

"Trying to hire me?" she asked. "I never wanted to be an Auror."

"I need someone who can oversee this project and that priority is given to the uniforms we need most rather than those that look best for the cameras," I replied.

"Fine, but I want a civilian contract, not a temporary hire," she said.

"Done, I'll let Percy know to expect you; you can hammer out the details with him."

I smiled suddenly and asked, "Do you know where the visitor's entrance is?"

I apparated directly into the phone booth, dialed M-A-G-I-C, and told the non-existent operator that I was there to oversee the destruction of Voldemort's surviving forces. My badge for the day read Ass-Kicker-in-Chief.

Someone had put up streamers and a big banner dominated the Atrium. The air was filled with glitter and tickertape and confetti that drifted down from the ceiling only to vanish above everyone's heads. It was all very festive.

I waved my badge at the security desk, but they made me stop and turn over my wand.

The simple request made me freeze in my tracks. My wand. My wand was missing. Gone. Sometime between I fell asleep and woke up from a dream that prominently featured my would-be-immortal enemy waving my wand around and acting very...civilly. With a shaking hand I pulled out the Elder wand and presented it to the security guard. The moment it had cleared its holster I could feel it awaken, feel the power that thrummed in its simple wooden shell.

Like many such objects they want to be used by a hand fitting and powerful enough to use them.

It was, really, just like him to give an answer that managed to explain everything without telling you anything. Except that I could feel the power in the wand, waiting, no, wanting to be used.

The security guard taped the wand with his probe then whimpered an eep as he jumped back, dropping the probe onto the marble floor where it began to melt.



"Y-y-you c-can go r-right in, Mister, er, Auror, uh, Chief Auror."

I nodded courteously as I put the wand away, trying to look as though nothing happened. "Sorry about that."

"N-no problem, I'll, uh, I'll just go get a replacement from Spare Security Support Supplies," the wizard said before vanishing. If it weren't for the fact that the anti-apparation wards were still up I'd have said he'd just disappeared.

I ignored the second desk and went straight to the lifts.

The main office was empty when I got in, but the conference room door was standing open. Percy and Travers were hovering over maps and parchments.

"How goes things?" I asked, tossing my visitor's badge on the table.

Travers peered at it. "You know, you don't have to use the visitor's entrance."

"I like to gauge the feeling in the Atrium," I said. Also since I couldn't apparate in, felt like a fool whenever I used the floo, and couldn't make portkeys (and wouldn't use one if I could), it limited the ways I could get in. I would rather live forever than flush myself down the loo again.

"And how is the Atrium today?" he asked.

"Festive," I said. "Security is better."

Travers nodded shortly.

"Anything new develop from last night?"

"Not yet," Percy said.

"Auror Tonks managed to collect a statement from her father," Travers said.

All that bit about secrets the day before, I spilled my guts to her and she couldn't even tell me what her father had to say about Voldemort and his minions? Feel the trust, Harry, feel the trust.

"Anything useful?"

"Not really. Even when we do catch them and prosecute there are only so many times you can have someone kissed by a dementor," Travers said.

"What's on my schedule for today?" I asked.

"The Minister wants to talk to you," Travers said. "I think we need to put you through some tests, find out just what you can do. And then we can start to teach you about the joys of paperwork."

"Sure...but I want to make a trip through Diagon Alley this morning," I said.

"More 'gauging the feeling' only in the streets?" Travers asked.

"Something like that," I said. I also needed to pick up purple goo for Pixel. Which reminded me, I needed to stop by Grimmauld place and see about its security so that I could move out of Hogwarts. Oh, and I needed to go back to Spinner's End and retrieve Severus' message.

"Percy, I spoke with Lavender. She'll take care of ordering and supplying the uniforms and everything so that's one less thing for you to keep track of."

Percy looked surprised, then nodded in relief. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me, thank her when she stops by," I said. "She wants a civilian contract to produce and supply uniforms for the Aurors."

Travers grimaced, "You're going to burn through our yearly budget before the month is over—"

"If I actually manage to do that the only thing it means is that our budget isn't nearly large enough," I said. "Does anyone know what the public reaction to the press release last night was like?"

Travers thumped the morning edition of the Daily Prophet on the table.

I picked it up and read a few paragraphs. "Potter Parties? They're calling my directive to burn down Death Eater safe-houses 'Potter Parties'?"

Travers didn't respond and Percy made a sort of half-hearted shrug.

"How delightful," I muttered, tossing it back down. "Percy, I want a list later today of all known Death Eaters and their fates or current whereabouts if known. I thought I knew them all but I found out last night that there were two at the Battle of Hogwarts that I'd never heard of. Find someone to go through all the old records and whatever, see if we can't find a few more that we don't know about."

Before Percy could respond Kingsley Shacklebolt walked into the conference room. Since when did later mean 'right this minute'?

"Minister," Travers said at the same time Percy sprang to his feet and said, "Sir." Travers and I remained sitting.

"Kingsley," I said.

"Harry," he replied.

"If the next thing you tell me is—" I began.

"I need a favor," we both said.

"—the answer is 'no'," I finished. "I have an office to organize, Death Eaters to hunt, new uniforms to arrange, and a house to put in order—both literally and figuratively. I'm swamped, find someone else."

"There isn't anyone else," he said.

"Merlin's balls there isn't," I muttered, causing Percy to sputter and choke.

"Just hear me out."

"I'm going to regret this, aren't I?" I asked, crossing my arms and telling Percy to breathe. "Okay, Minister, have your say, but I'm going to want a favor of my own."

Kingsley smiled but it wasn't particularly humorous. "You're already learning to play the game."

"Minister, you don't want to know the kinds of games I've learned to play." I was trying for tired but the words came out bitter. "What do you want?"

"I received a message from the Queen asking for a senior member of the Ministry of Magic to personally brief her on the state of affairs in our world."

"And you want Harry to do it?" Percy asked. "That's crazy."

I don't think any of us were more shocked than Percy himself was at him telling Kingsley off, but it was downright mild compared to what I'd been about to unleash.

Kingsley looked at me and raised an eyebrow.

I shrugged. "What are you looking at me for, Kingsley? I agree with him," I said with a nod towards Percy. "If nothing else just what do you think she's going to see when I walk in? I'll tell you, a seventeen year old kid. The entire idea is insane."

Kingsley quirked a smile. "I don't want you to give the brief, Harry."

"Well, good," I said.

"I want you to accompany me and help me give it," he said instead.

"Okay, I admit," I said, "that is only almost as crazy as you asking me to give it, which you aren't. My previous reasoning stands, find someone else."

"Who else would you have me bring, Harry?" he asked. "I don't have heads for more than half the Departments yet. I can't trust most of the senior staff, and the one I do trust, Connie, has just as big, if not bigger, mess than you to deal with. The others are just as busy—even if I did trust them, and I don't—and the few that aren't are so

narrowly focused in their specialty that asking them would be foolish on my part."

"So hire someone," I said. "It couldn't be that hard."

"Who knows about all the problems, what has happened in the last forty-eight hours and what changes are being planned?"

"Kingsley, I don't know what is being planned," I said plaintively. "I'm having a hard enough time keeping my head above water with just this one office, I have no idea how deep the lake really is, there's no gillyweed in sight this time, and I never did get that blasted bubble-head charm working right."

That managed to draw a slight smile from both Percy and the newest Minister of Magic, Travers just frowned.

"Right now in many ways the Auror Office is the most important," Kingsley told me, "And even if you haven't been formally briefed on plans for changes you do know where the most serious problems are."

"So you came here expecting to get me to just stroll into Buckingham Palace next to you and pull another miracle out of my bloody arse and save the day," I sighed.

"Something like that," Kingsley said, "and it's Windsor."

"Excuse me?"

"The briefing, it's not going to be at Buckingham Palace. It's to be at Windsor Castle."

"How marvelous," I said.

"Thank you," he said sincerely.

"Remember your gratitude when you see the bill for new uniforms."

"You're trading in your favor for uniforms?" Kingsley asked surprised.

"No," I said with a tight smile. "The uniforms are a real and practical need for us—that is, the Aurors—to do our jobs. If they are not

provided I won't go with you to Windsor, I will quite, I will explain why to every reporter that asks, and then maybe I'll find a secluded little place where I can sit and write my biography and maybe watch my godson grow up. I figure I'll make a decent-sized fortune selling it in the wizarding world, and then maybe I'll go and market it in the muggle-world as a fantasy novel—hell, I can probably make it a seven-book series and get a movie deal in the process and end up the twelfth or so richest person in Britain. The one thing that I know for certain is that no one—in either world—will believe that one bloody word of it is true."

I paused in thought, "no, I take that back. There are probably one or two people that are just that brand of crazy."

Kingsley shook his head, "No need to threaten, Harry, we have a supplier—"

"You had a supplier," I cut him off. "I bet those scarlet uniforms look really pretty on parade, but all I was thinking when I saw them yesterday was 'curse me, curse me'. New uniforms for practical wear whenever an Auror is on duty so that the public can see us and instantly recognize us, and that are dark so that we don't become nice little targets. All of them, including dress and ceremonial robes, will have at least Weasley Shield-Wear-level protection. The public has to see us in them so we have to get the initial uniforms as quickly as possible—though some, like the evening-dress robes can wait for now since I don't foresee any parties in our near future, but, given my scores in Divination, I may be wrong about that. Finally, I am not going to make people who don't get paid enough as it is shell out for something that the Auror Office should be issuing as essential equipment for the job!"

Kingsley closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. "Very well...do you know how much?"

"Lavender should be talking to Percy later today," I said.

He nodded and sighed. "Very well," he said again, "I'm not sure where we'll get the funds, but I'll see that you get the uniforms regardless...you're right, you do need them."

"When is the appointment?"

"This afternoon," he said.

I shook my head and said softly, "I can't do it, not today. If for no other reason than I can't go looking like this," I waved a hand at my robes.

Kingsley started to object, then just nodded tiredly. "I'll see that it's changed, but it probably can't be put off past tomorrow." He turned to leave, but I stopped him.

"Minister, there's a thousand-plus year old basilisk at Hogwarts. It's been dead for five years, and I don't know what condition it's in, but I can get access to it if anything of it is still...commercially viable, I guess."

He looked at me, "You mean those rumors about the Chamber of Secrets are true?"

"Which ones?" I asked. "The ones about why and exactly how Lockhart lost his memories, no. The ones about how I personally slew a basilisk single-handedly...mostly yes, though the fight wasn't half as exciting as the rumors make it sound, and I came a lot closer to dieing."

"Basilisk doesn't decay naturally," Travers said. "Not quickly. I don't know how it'd affect potions, which is one of the things rendered basilisk is primarily used for, but given how rare basilisk ingredients are..." he shrugged. "Even somewhat spoiled pieces should be worth quite a bit."

I turned back to Kingsley, "If the Ministry has people capable of rendering it down into something saleable the Ministry can have a quarter of the proceeds. Hogwarts a quarter, a quarter to charity split evenly between magical orphanages or similar charities and charities that aid those who suffered due to Voldemort and his minions—including the actions of the Ministry for the past year—the final quarter to be split evenly between myself and a fund for the Auror Office. A deniable fund, for when we need things or services that would be hard to explain in an official budget. My only requests are that the skin or hide, if useable as armor for the Auror uniforms as judged by Lavender or someone appointed by her, should be put to that purpose without cost and that the solitary fang laying well away from the rest of the body should be returned to me."

"That's...very generous of you, Harry," Kingsley said. "Yes, I believe I can find a small team with the appropriate skills. Shall I send them up when I find them?"

"Better floo-call first," I said. "I have plans and might not be available."

He nodded and left.

"You don't have time to baby-sit a bunch of people dissect a giant snake," Travers objected.

"That's why I'm not going to," I replied. I turned to Percy. "Ron knows how to get in the chamber. I want him and Hermione to escort the crew Kingsley sends us. Tell Ron to have them blindfolded first, and not to be in the room when he opens the entrance. They can take their blindfolds off when they reach the bottom, but I want similar precautions leaving."

"Bottom?" Percy asked.

"Bottom," I repeated. "Don't worry, they'll understand. Oh, and tell them not to go beyond the chamber where the basilisk is. I don't know what else there is to the chamber and I don't want anyone wandering into something that might get them killed."

"And if there is anything valuable in the rest of the chamber?" Percy asked.

"Then it'll keep until I have a chance to go back and sort it out," I said. "Their job is to go in, chop the giant dead snake into tiny little pieces without letting anyone wander off and get lost, and get out."

"You don't think you are taking security of the Chamber a little too far?" Travers asked.

"To the best of my knowledge outside of Hermione, Ron, and me, everyone who knows where the chamber is and how to open it is dead," I said. "The Chamber itself is unstable. The first time I was in it there was a cave-in that very nearly killed both me and Ron. That alone is reason enough to try and keep people out. Also, since I don't know what else is down there, and that one of the people who



knew how to get in there was Voldemort, I don't want people wandering around areas that I don't know are safe."

There was a knock on the door that Kingsley had closed behind himself when he left. A moment later Tonks poked her head in. "Visitor here to see you."

"Oh?" I asked.

Tonks stepped aside and Lavender in her magic-driven wheelchair rolled into her room.

"If that's what everyone has to go through it's a wonder that anything gets done."

"The visitor's entrance?" Tonks asked.

"Yesterday was worse," I told her.

"You come in by the visitor's entrance?" Lavender asked.

"I like to get a feel for the magical world and it's the best gauge I've seen yet," I said stiffly.

"And the apparition wards prevent you from apparating, we were never taught how to make port-keys, and you stumble coming out of the floo," Lavender said.

I frowned at her, "Where did you hear that?"

Lavender smiled, "Harry, everyone knows that." She reached onto her robes and pulled off a badge. "What did yours say?"

"Well, Percy here is my lackey, and if you see Bill Weasley he's apparently a mercenary."

"I didn't ask about them."

I sighed and slid my badge to her.

"Ass-Kicker-in-Chief?" she said.

"Just for the day," I replied. "What about you?"

"Couturier," she said, tossing the badge on the table.

"I take it you're the one the Chief Auror went to for our uniforms?" Travers asked.

"Travers, meet Lavender Brown," I said, stepping between them. "Lavender, Winton Travers, second-in-charge of the Auror Office."

I turned to Percy and continued. "Lavender has agreed to arrange all of the details of designing, ordering, and getting us our uniforms. Keep in mind all the work that saves you when she negotiates her price."

I paused to make sure he understood, and once Percy had nodded I turned to Lavender. "Fair, understood? Try to cheat me or my department..."

"You've already been more than fair, Harry," Lavender said. "I'm not going to try and take advantage of you."

"Good," I said. I turned back to Percy. "Make sure she has access to the people with the most experience in various forms of armor, both specially enchanted protective items as well as magic-resistant material. Also check to make sure Bill is available; maybe he knows some wards that can be woven into the cloth or something."

"I should have final designs for utility, working, and dress uniforms by...Tuesday, I think," Lavender said, "maybe Wednesday. It'll be a bit longer for armor since I know less about that. At least magic makes the whole designing process go more quickly. Production too. The longest part is probably going to be enchanting the fabric with those protection spells. I'll have to talk to George Weasley about that."

"Sounds good," I said, "Except that I have a meeting with the Queen scheduled for tomorrow."

"The Queen?" Lavender asked, clearly confused. "Of what?"

"Oh, you know," I said as Travers tried politely not to laugh and Percy looked like he was going to have a stroke. "England, Scotland,

Ireland..." I frowned, "just how does that work, anyway? I mean, on the muggle side Ireland is mostly its own independent country."

"Mostly we try not to think about it," Travers said. "Of course, ours is hardly the worst in the world. Germany, well..."

Tonks managed to snicker.

"What?" I asked as Lavender frowned.

"Harry," Tonks said, "even in the muggle world a unified Germany is a pretty recent phenomena and I'm not talking about that little tiff about political systems that's been going on for the past four or five decades. In the wizarding world Germany is a bunch of tiny little states that have very little to do with modern borders, all of whom owe their allegiance to some petty little baron or prince, the vast majority of which no longer exist. The only time they've ever been really united was back when Grindleweld was doing the uniting."

Travers nodded, "Be thankful, Mr. Potter. Seventy years ago we were still responsible for a sizeable portion of northern France."

"As fascinating as this is," Lavender said in a frosty voice, "do you know what this means, Harry?"

"Dress robes?" I asked.

"Ceremonial," she said shortly. "Do you even have any idea on what the proper protocol is?" I started to reply but she cut me off. "And before you ask, no, I don't know what the proper protocol is for a situation like this. Is it a private audience or something public, do you even know—"

"I have to help Kingsley brief her on the state of the magical world, realm, something like that...I guess," I said.

Lavender gave me this sort of gaping look. "Who thought up this insanity?"

I said 'Kingsley'. At the same time Travers said 'Shacklebolt' and Percy replied 'the Minister of Magic'. In many ways he's come a long ways, but Percy will always be Percy at heart.

"Private then," Lavender said, "probably, what with the Secrecy clauses and everything. There might be one or two others, maybe the Prime Minister...I honestly don't know for certain though. But do you know for certain if it's, well, just the wizarding world, or the entire realm?"

I frowned, "Is there a difference?"

Travers and Percy winced. Tonks managed a slight grin—and did my eyes deceive me or did her hair get...pinkish for a moment? Lavender just stared at me. "You are aware that the Monarch of the United Kingdom is also the Monarch of various countries of the Commonwealth, don't you?"

I nodded, "Something about separate titles, though, right?"

Tonks broke in, "Exactly. Gives each country an equal footing as it were since the Empire broke up. But Harry...in the magical world the Empire never did break up."

I frowned, "I'm obviously missing something here."

"You're making a mistake a lot of muggle-borns make," Travers said. "Maps of the wizarding world correspond only vaguely to those of the muggle world; we've already pointed out Germany and France as examples. Actually, as far as maps go, ours match fairly closely with those of the muggle world with the exception of the Irish Republic which doesn't exist in the magical world. That goes back to when King Arthur united the British Isles in the early sixth century. Arthur established himself as High King over the isles as well as King of England—actually King of the Britons—in particular, which is why Ireland, Wales, and Scotland, and England all had their own separate monarchies following Arthur's death.

"When Arthur died the kingdom in the muggle world fractured, but in the magical world Merlin managed to keep them together as a political body before his death. Since all four were, and remain, technically separate kingdoms it does make for a few interesting situations—"

"It's why each has its own national Quidditch team," Tonks said.

"—but on the whole nothing too troubling."

I thought about that for a moment, "Didn't Arthur do more than just unit the Isles? I remember reading something about Gaul..."

Travers nodded. "Geoffrey of Monmouth's book, right? Well, Geoffrey was a muggle writing some six centuries after Arthur's death and his records were none too exact. I think he listed Iceland and Norway as well. In reality Arthur invaded those places, but never conquered them. He was in it to stop Saxon invasions, not expand what was then an already sizeable Kingdom. He did conquer the Channel Islands to use as supply forts and staging points for future invasions of Gaul, but that was it. We picked up a large chunk of northern France after the Conquest since William controlled both the muggle and magical sides of his holdings. That particular nightmare was finally resolved a bit before Grindlewald started making the news."

"And then the muggles, what, tried to get all of King Arthur's kingdom, high kingdom, whatever...back?" I asked.

"Pretty much," Travers said. "Oh, they might not have realized it, but that's what they were doing, or at least were trying to do. Almost succeeded until that mess with Ireland way back when, truth be told. Are you ready for the complicated part?"

"This isn't complicated already?" I asked.

Travers hesitated, then turned to Tonks. "Close the door."

Tonks looked at him for a moment, then got up and sealed the door with a series of complicated spells, some of which I vaguely recognized but was lost on most.

"What I've discussed so far is the situation as most witches and wizards know it, and is as far as they care to know it," Travers said. "I'm not going to request any Oaths, but it might be wise of you to keep your mouths shut about what I'm going to say next."

Percy had a pensive look which suggested he either knew what was coming or suspected what it might be. Since Percy usually liked to show how powerful he was it meant that whatever it was, was bad enough that he didn't talk about it.

"The complicated part is that the Ministry is doing two jobs, serving two different masters," Travers said bluntly.

"The witches and wizards of...the British Isles," I said, making a mental note to find out just what we officially called ourselves, if anything, "and the Queen."

"Wrong," Travers said. "Our first master is King Arthur, the Ministry—or at least what the Ministry has evolved from—is the Steward of the magical half of His realm and holds it for His return. Our second master, mistress currently, is the present monarchy doing essentially the same job. That's the easy part. The complicated part is as follows.

"First, we're a caretaker government for the current monarch, not a steward. That particular little headache comes from the reign of Edward III who saw uniting England with the magic side through direct rule as the first step of re-conquering Arthur's empire. The equivalent of the current Department of Mysteries said that the oaths sworn by the successor states, such as they were, after Arthur's death seemed to say that any of the monarchs could. In Scotland there ceased to be a monarchy well into the middle of the ninth century so it wasn't a problem. Likewise it was thought the same could be said for Edward since William the Conqueror had broken the line of Anglo-Saxon kings left behind by Arthur, and with it the Oaths involved. Unfortunately Edward's mother was Isabella of France and she descended from Harold Godwinson, which brought the blood-oaths back into power.

"Edward put his son in charge of us. I think the plan was that he'd be ruling us before he ascended to the throne, and after his father's death he'd just continue ruling both and pass them on to his heirs. But then the Black Prince got himself killed before much more than a token government was established and his father never got around to trying again before he died a year later. There were a couple of other tries, all broken up by wars, plagues, the Commonwealth...

"What that means for us, however, is that the current monarch can at any time dissolve the Ministry and resume direct personal rule, at least over the magical environs and peoples, or appoint a Steward to do so for her. Unfortunately that would mean that we'd be caught between two magically binding Oaths; one to hold King Arthur's magical realms until he returns, the other to govern the current

boundaries of the muggle United Kingdom. To make matters worse, given a number of treaties between the two worlds, the Queen has both power and reason to have the Ministry dissolved. I doubt she could get away with personal rule, frankly it'd take so much time that even the muggles, oblivious as they usually are, would notice—"

"That's not fair," Lavender said coolly. She turned to me, "The Royals are incredibly public figures, Harry. If any of them were to suddenly disappear entirely, or almost entirely, from the public eye it would be noticed."

Travers shrugged, "It doesn't really matter if it's fair or not. If she decides to replace us we all lose. Not just us in the Ministry because of our Oaths. Who do you think she's going to get to act as her Steward or whatever government she decides? The Queen may be better informed than most muggles on the disclosure list, but even she doesn't have enough knowledge to set up an effective government for us from scratch."

"So then Kingsley and I have to keep her from disbanding the Ministry of Magic," I said.

"Pretty much," Travers admitted.

"Is there anything else I should be worried about?" I asked.

"I won't get into all the treaties and their ramifications," Travers said bluntly, "frankly you don't have the time and it all comes down to the same thing."

"Fine," I said. "Where do we sit in regards to the rest of the Commonwealth of Nations or whatever the wizarding world calls it?"

"It was decided—centuries ago, mind you—that as, uh, part of that caretaker government for the current muggles, to go along with what they did as far as expansion were concerned," Travers said. "Partly that was to protect the English muggles against native wizards and witches. Partly it was seen—at that time—as our duty to both expand the Monarch's realms, as well as keep our borders more or less in agreement with those in the muggle world."

"And expand Arthur's realm?" Lavender asked.

Travers shrugged

"It was a flat-out power grab," I said. "An excuse to expand, acquire old magical artifacts, new magic-users under the Ministry's thumb, new places of power, money..."

Travers shrugged again, "Something like that. My point is, when the Empire fractured in the muggle world and countries began getting their independence from the crown, it didn't happen that way in the magical world."

"Mostly," Tonks said.

"Mostly," Travers said with a nod of agreement. "The biggest reason for that is because we had...different goals than the muggles did. Wealth and power were, as you pointed out, still prime reasons, but the Ministry didn't really try to colonize in the way the muggles did. The muggles...seized wealth. Our economy didn't, doesn't, work the same way. Some of that is because what the muggles consider exotic goods we either didn't, or had little use for. A large chunk of it was because the companies that reaped the most benefit in the muggle world were the companies involved in transporting those exotic goods from faraway markets, or in supporting those companies that did. Whereas we have magic, our transportation costs were and remain virtually nil in comparison." He frowned, "That's a simplified explanation but relatively honest."

He waited a moment before continuing. "We established new governments, or rather, altered existing ones to suit ourselves—a lot of native titles, for example, found their way into positions that are in more than a few cases identical to ones in our own Ministry. We established rules so that everyone did business on the same level, and wrote laws to prevent people from taking gross advantage of the system, provided support as we deemed necessary, improved infrastructure, even established a few magical schools, and once we had determined that everything was working, we turned power over to the new native Ministry of Magic.

"Eventually something like the Commonwealth of Nations was formed, well before the muggle Empire broke apart, to govern interaction between the Ministries because ours was never really interested in governing more than it already was. Or rather, it was decided that the Oaths concerning Arthur's realm made expanding it



a...risky proposition—though not before several families became very rich. Technically the Minister of Magic can take direct control of any other Ministry, acting in his role as the monarch's caretaker in the magical world. To actually do so would piss off ninety percent of the world, and requires the approval of the monarch which is why Fudge probably never tried to grab more power."

"And Scrimgeour?" I asked.

"He never thought outside assistance was needed," Travers said. "Getting back to the original point, Harry is that the Minister of Magic is Her Majesty's...representative in the wizarding world. If she wants a full accounting of her magical realm he goes to her. That's why it's important to know exactly what she asked for."

"Fine," I said and turned to Lavender.

"I'll have those robes ready for you," she said. "At this short notice it will be—"

She paused as an increasingly familiar cat ran out of a hole that had suddenly appeared at the base of one wall. Pixel ran up to me, deposited a small scroll at my feet, took one look at the other people in the room, and sprinted for the wall. A second hole appeared and she disappeared into it, the hole closing behind her.

"Was that a—"

"Yes," I said to Lavender.

"Did she—" Tonks began.

"Yes," I told her as I picked up the scroll. It was little more than a rolled up piece of parchment secured with a piece of ribbon. Tonks was scrolled on one side. "Mail," I said, handing it to her.

"Well," Lavender said as Tonks read her letter, "Percy and I have some negotiations we really must get started on if we're to have you properly dressed for tomorrow." She turned her chair around and it obediently began to wheel towards the door. Percy practically ran me down to get to the door ahead of her. There was an odd squelching noise, and the walls turned briefly gooey as they tried to

keep the door secure, but then the spells broke and the walls snapped back into place with a twang.

When I turned back to Tonks she had finished the letter, and was so pale that she was only three shades short of being translucent.

"Tonks?" I asked.

"It was about Dad. I—" she looked at Travers, then back at me.

"Go," I said.

She nodded once and quickly left and before the door could swing closed, Bill stuck his head in.

"Come in," I said.

Bill closed the door behind him and frowned. "You look tired."

"Couldn't sleep," I said. "By your presence I assume that you want in?"

"If you'll have me," Bill said, "and on the condition that I don't have to wear those red robes."

"Is something wrong with our uniform?" Travers growled.

"Besides the fact that it practically screams 'curse me'?" Bill asked.

"The Uniform—"

"Enough," I said. Both turned to look at me. "Bill, you will wear the uniform issued, the same one we're all going to be getting and that we all will be wearing. Travers, the uniform issue has been settled. Go see Lavender's designs if you want but what she has planned is what we're getting. Live with it."

Bill nodded in satisfaction and Travers nodded grudgingly. "The rest aren't going to like it," he warned.

"We're keeping the red and gold for ceremonial dress," I said, "And red will be the primary trim color. Ask Lavender to duplicate some of her sketches when you have a chance and pass them around so

that everyone knows what they're going to get, and then tell them to leave her alone so that she can do her job."

"Fine." He nodded at Bill and stepped out of the room.

"I distinctly remember being told once that goblins can't take sides in a wizard fight," I continued to Bill.

"Not can't, won't," Bill said. "The last set of goblin rebellions were really bad and mostly because they did take a side and that side lost. The wizarding world, well—" he shrugged.

"Mercy isn't exactly one of our strong suits," I said.

He snorted. "Basically all the European clans agreed to never take sides again, but they will play both sides off against each other."

"And if one did?" I asked.

"Did what? Take sides?" Bill asked. "If the other European clans found out it might start a clan war if evidence was damning enough and the Clan Lord didn't accede to whatever they decided."

"And if he did give them what they want?"

Bill whistled silently. "Line-death for the Clan Lord and Clan Council of Elders. All of their biological offspring, all of their raised offspring, all of the biological parents of their biological offspring—"

"Husbands and wives, then," I said.

Bill shook his head, "Goblins have...complex customs when it comes to reproduction. I don't know of anyone human that can keep their clan, sept, and family relations straight.

"Basically though, they're going to kill anyone related to the Clan Lord and Council by blood, all those taught or raised by them, and then go and do the same to all the goblins personally involved. Even if it was only one or two goblins that took part a clan would still lose a large chunk of its population since each family or sept can only have one person on the Council."

"And the Clan Lord?"

"The Lordship has to be held through strength of arms," Bill said. "Those who have it very seldom die old, and then that's only so if they are so greatly revered that no one would challenge him...or so terrifying that the same holds true."

"And how big is a clan?"

Bill stared at me for a moment, "You mean you..." he shook his head. "Harry," he said slowly, "each branch of Gringotts is run by a different clan. I thought you knew that. Are you trying to tell me that the goblins took a side?"

I nodded, "Voldemort's." I explained about just what it was we had been after in Gringotts while Bill took a chair and sat back with a horrified look on his face.

"Harry, you have a whole different issue than merely taking sides," he said when I finished explaining about the Horcruxes...er, Horcruxi (scratch that, Horcruxes sound better). "Something like that would be near the top of the Forbidden Artifacts list. The things that the goblins have agreed to never do any business with. If you have proof of that and turned it over to the other clans..."

"What would happen?" I asked.

"They'd wipe the clan out," he said bluntly. "It wouldn't be enough for death by slow torture for the entire clan, but they'd do the killing individually starting with the youngest and they'd make all the others watch. Those that didn't die in the fighting of course; and the clan would go down fighting."

"Do you think they would be willing to make a deal?"

"You want to blackmail them?"

"No," I said. "If nothing else they'd turn on me the first chance they'd get, wouldn't they?"

He nodded.

"I was thinking something more like they found out they'd been duped and in return set out to destroy it. Since they couldn't, without

taking a side in the war, they made a deal with a private citizen, allowed him and his friends to 'sneak in', and remove said object from their premises."

Bill sat back in consideration. "They'd realize that everyone can get the bad end of a deal, and it'd let them off a hook by taking a shot at the person who tricked them—which the other clans would appreciate—and it'd help reinforce the whole story about how no one has ever successfully stole something in their care. They'd have to know that sooner or later the story will come out, about the theft if nothing else... I suppose it'd depend upon what you asked for in exchange and the exact spin you give it."

"Something that might make them a lot of money," I said. "Would I talk to a manager, or the Director of Gringotts, or the Clan Lord?"

"Harry, the Clan Lord is the Director of Gringotts."

"Really? How convenient," I said. "Interested in taking a little walk?"

Diagon Alley was much like I remembered it the first time I saw it only more so. The narrow street was filled with people. The dark robes were gone in favor of a riot of colors. Magical firecrackers, bursts of colorful mage-fire, sweet-scented rainbow-hued smoke, and, in one narrow corner, a gentle rain of falling stars, competed with people for space. Owls flew in flocks that were thicker than the squadrons of enchanted parchment memos at the Ministry. In the large open square where seven magical alleys met—just past where Knockturn Alley twisted away from Diagon Alley—an impromptu five-sided quidditch game was in progress. Given the throngs I was grateful that Bill had layered glamours over me.

"This is crazy," Bill yelled over the roar. "We should make these people go home."

"Let them party as long as they don't attract muggle attention," I said. "As long as they are partying they aren't thinking about what we're doing at the Ministry. I'd rather we consolidate our positions and start making changes, or at least as many of them as we can get, before they start screaming bloody murder."

We slowly made our way through the crowd. Someone pressed large glasses of butterbeer into our hands as toasts rang out to

Harry Potter, Merlin, and the King—several of us corrected this last toast, but one exceedingly old witch who agreed with us may have been talking about Victoria.

The Magical Menagerie provided a little shelter. Most of the party seemed to be keeping itself to the alley proper and a few bars and eateries like the Leaky Cauldron. I showed the vial with a few drops of purple stuff remaining to a clerk, and for most of my remaining galleons, received enough to treat Pixel, as well as a month's supply of proper cat food and a pair of self-cleaning litter-boxes—one of which I had sent to Hogwarts while shrinking the other and putting it in my pocket.

Getting into Gringotts was easier. The goblins had taken the simple step of putting out security. Security in the sense of the biggest, meanest-looking goblins I'd ever seen dressed in steel plate armor and carrying weapons. None of the witches or wizards intent on partying wanted anything to do with them so there was an empty semi-circle twenty feet deep in front of the entrance.

"Red Caps," Bill said as we made our way towards them.

I looked around; frankly the area was probably the last place I'd have looked for the foul little creatures that Remus had taught us about in my third year. "Where?"

Bill gestured towards the guard-goblins, each of whom was a good eight feet or more in height and built like a small mountain-troll. "Back when the goblins still had an army—and more recently when they could still hire themselves out as mercenaries—the Red Caps were the biggest and toughest of the lot. Shock Troops. Their hide is as tough as a giant's, they're as strong as ogres, and they can take more damage than a cave troll before collapsing. Unless you kill them or sear the wound closed with fire, they'll heal if there's a spark of life left in their body. I saw one lose most of an arm once. It was up and walking in an hour. A week later you couldn't tell it was ever wounded. You see those red berets they have?"

"Yes," I said. Frankly they were hard to miss since they weren't the expected steel helms and fresh blood trickled down their heads from them.

"Well, like redcaps they like to dip it in the blood of their enemies. It used to be that a goblin, no matter how big and tough, couldn't be a Red Cap unless he had enough magic to make his cap bleed fresh blood, or at least keep the blood on it fresh. When goblins lost most of their overt magic following the various goblin rebellions it was one of the last powers they lost and most of the Red Caps of the time killed themselves because of it. Now they keep the blood fresh by bleeding themselves for it, or by fighting amongst themselves and the victors claiming blood as the prize."

As we passed through the cordon it seemed to me that the Red Caps, already standing at attention, stood a little more stiffly.

"And they aren't taken in at all by a simple little glamour," Bill said as we passed through the bronze outer doors.

They thundered shut behind us as the two Red Caps standing guard by the silver inner doors straightened, but did not open the inner doors.

"How can Gringotts help you today, Mr. Potter?" the goblin standing next to the door asked with a toothy smile. "I assure you, you are in enough trouble with us already."

"Are you sure you want to know?" I asked.

His expression faltered slightly. It wasn't anything visible, but something in his eyes gave away his surprise.

"I could tell you," I said softly. "But it concerns a matter between myself and—" A good threat only goes so far, and I knew as soon as I realized that I didn't know the name of the goblin that I had to see that it was going to fail.

"Clan Lord Ragnok," Bill cut in smoothly, "will most likely have him tortured to death—slowly—if he knows, Harry."

I looked at him and nodded my gratitude before turning back to the goblin. "Please inform Clan Lord and Branch-Director of Gringotts Ragnok that Harry Potter, Auror-Commander, the Boy-Who-Lived, so on and so forth, would like to meet him tomorrow to discuss matters of mutual benefit and profit. Also tell him that unless we meet it is likely that there will be extremely...adverse consequences

for Gringotts, and his branch of it in particular. My office can be contacted to arrange a time that is mutually acceptable."

"I see," the goblin said in a tone that suggested he very much doubted it.

"No you don't," I said. "If you did you'd wish you hadn't. Please see that my message is relayed directly. I can delay matters for a short time, but sooner or later things will be brought to light. Once that happens there will be no more I can do. I will lose very little if that happens. The opposite is true for Gringotts."

"And you so graciously offer your 'help' for free?" the goblin sneered.

"The price of my assistance is negotiable," I said. "But not by you. Good day." I turned and started for the bronze doors. Either the Red Caps on the other side had been listening in or there was some magic that told them when someone was coming since they pulled the doors open for me before I reached them.

I nodded respectfully to the Red Cap who seemed to be in charge as I left. The sky was beginning to darken but I was going to be gone long before the rain hit so I waited until I was well into the crowd before shouting to Bill, "Too much?"

He shook his head and hollered back, "Just right, I think! Where did you learn that?"

"Six years of listening to Draco Malfoy." I replied. "It gave me a lot of material for my snob-wizard act."

Bill nodded, "So where to next?"

"Spinner's End," I said.

He nodded and we apparated.

Spinner's End was much like it had been the day before. One or two pieces of trash may have been new, but there was no way to tell them from the old.

"Depressing," Bill said.



"You have no idea," I muttered. I led him to Severus' house, silently manipulating the wards to let us through. I wasn't certain what would happen if I didn't, something quiet and deadly, probably, but I wasn't interested in finding out the hard way. Well, not too interested in finding out.

"So this is how ol' Professor Snape lived," Bill said as I led him into the main room. "And he left you this?"

I shrugged, "As far as I know he didn't have any family. I don't know if he left any formal provisions, but he'd warded his rooms in Hogwarts so that I could get in."

"Why on earth would he do that?"

I didn't reply as I walked over to the fireplace and jabbed it with Severus' wand.

A moment past and then Severus' glowing green head appeared. "The Password is something I am not."

"Severus Snape was not a coward."

"I am no traitor."

"Harry?" Bill asked.

I took a step back, "It's some kind of security ward-thing, I think. Probably asks me questions until it can confirm my identity."

"Okay," Bill said. "What's the problem?"

"He didn't have time to reset it after I found out...things about him, if I answer with too much knowledge or not enough..."

"A trap," Bill said, his eyes gleaming. "Well in that case," he drew his wand and began making tiny little flicking movements with the tip.

"And if you try to bypass the security ward?" I asked.

"I might accidentally trigger it," he shrugged.

I turned back to the fireplace. "Severus Snape killed Albus Dumbledore as he was instructed to," I said, and then added, "By Albus Dumbledore."

"What?" Bill demanded, his wand had stopped flicking.

"Quiet," I snapped. "There are less than ten people who know that; and only one person alive who knew that before last night."

"Why did I save Harry Potter's life?"

"Harry, listen to me, if you answer wrong and there is a trap—"

"It's probably the potions going in the basement," I said. "Some kind of explosive under a stasis charm or something," I said.

"So what's the answer? Did he do it on Voldemort's orders or because Dumbledore told him to?" Bill asked.

"Neither, it's a trick question," I said. I turned back to the fireplace. "Severus Snape told Voldemort he saved my life from Quirrell to cement Albus Dumbledore's trust."

"Do you know that for certain?" Bill asked.

I shook my head. What Severus had done to get in Voldemort's good graces was something he hadn't told me, but it was the only reasonable explanation I could think of. It was probably how he was able to explain working against Voldemort's purposes, thwarting Quirrell and hindering Moody/Crouch.

"Why did I save Harry Potter's life?"

"Remus Lupin told Harry that you saved Harry's life because you owed James Potter for saving his," I told the thing.

"Harry, it's repeating—"

"I noticed."

"What is my worst memory?"

"Severus Snape was walking by the lake, James Potter and Sirius Black stopped him and, in a situation which was clearly not the first, used him for target practice in front of other students, including using his own spell, Levicorpus," I said carefully, "And when Lily Evens intervened he called her a mudblood."

"Why did I save Harry Potter's life?"

I wanted to scream at it. I really, really did.

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches," I quoted. The head disappeared before I could get to the second line.

"That's never a good sign," Bill said.

"What do you mean?" I snapped, released an angry breath, and started to offer an apology, only Bill wasn't looking at me.

"When talking heads disappear like that," he said as he cautiously flicked his wand about. "Usually they drop the ceiling on you, or start flames spouting from hidden holes in the walls, though I've seen a number that drop the floor out instead so you fall down a long shaft into a pool of water, or lava, or sharp spikes or something..." he frowned in consideration, "...and those are just the mundane traps."

"Lovely," I said in reply. But the ceiling didn't come crashing down, and the floor didn't fall out from under us, and hordes of raving inferi didn't come crawling out of the woodwork. I pulled a trunk out of my pocket and unshrunk it.

"Careful, just because I didn't detect any traps doesn't mean there aren't any," Bill said.

"There are traps," I said, "just not ones that are going to kill us right now." I gave the room one more careful look, then slid away Severus' wand and drew the Elder Wand and cast a shrinking charm at one of the many bookcases that lined the walls. It quickly shrunk, books and all.

"Nice charm," Bill said.

"Thanks," I said, shrinking the other shelves before giving the trunk a firm rap with the wand. "Pack."

"Tonks?" Bill asked as the shelves packed themselves neatly into the trunk.

"Showed it to me before fifth year," I said.

"Good thing you had that trunk," he said. "Did you come here planning to loot the place?"

"I wouldn't use the word 'loot', exactly," I said.

"I'm a Cursebreaker, we loot just fine," Bill said. "So what did you come here for?"

"Frankly I thought there would be a message of some kind."

"Like why he saved your life?"

"I know damn well why he saved my life and it wasn't because of some prophecy," I growled impatiently. "He saved my life because he was an obnoxious prick who was obsessed with my mother and the only way to kill the man who killed her was to get me to offer myself up like a sacrificial goat!"

I turned to Bill. "He was one of the two bravest people I've ever known, but he was a miserable bastard to everyone in his life. He was obsessed with my mother from the moment he saw her, and one word, spoken in anger at the age of fifteen, cost him the closest thing he ever had to a friend. He turned over to Dumbledore as soon as he realized her life was in danger—not my family's, mind you, hers—he tried to bargain with Voldemort for her life. He spent the next sixteen years living to see him dead, seven of those keeping me alive, not because I was his student but because of her."

I turned away and headed for the door to the stairs, the trunk floating after me.

"When you said that you had to offer yourself up..." Bill's voice came from behind me as he followed me up the stairs.

"I was pretty sure—hell with it. I knew I was going to die. I did, die. Happy?" I asked.

"But you're alive right now."

Brilliant detective work.

"You know those life and death choices that heroes in stories always have to make, and somehow always manage to make the right call?"

"Yes..." Bill said slowly as I opened the door to the room on the left.

Empty. Guest room, probably only ever used by Wormtail, but I could be wrong. I wouldn't have put it past Severus to have had a tiny cage in the basement that he stuck him in at night.

"Well I got confronted with one and I'm beginning to think I made the wrong call," I said, opening the other. It was a dark room with a heavy wooden bed and similar desk. A small cabinet stood next to the bed, and a chest of drawers was positioned next to a closet. The only touch of humanity in the room was another bookcase on one wall, and a photograph of Hogwarts in a heavy silver frame on the bedside cabinet.

"What do you mean, 'the wrong call'?" Bill asked as I picked up the picture. "You killed Voldemort."

I ripped off the back of the frame and pulled out two pictures. A pristine muggle photograph of a young Lily Evens dressed in Hogwarts robes—probably taken before her first year due to lack of house badge—had been nestled between the backing and the photograph of Hogwarts.

"I didn't need to," I said, tucking both away in my robes. "He was dead the moment he raised his wand against me the first time the other night. He was stripped of his protections, his immortality. Old age would have killed him sooner or later—sooner, probably, prolonged use of the Dark Arts is bad for one's health."

"Was that a joke?" Bill asked as I shrunk down the bookcase and added it to the trunk.

"No really, no," I said.

He was silent as I quickly checked the cabinet and drawers. I didn't find anything interesting and went back down the stairs. Like Severus' bedroom I hadn't recast the wards on it so I simply opened the trap door. A wooden step-ladder positioned below and I climbed down.

"This came later, it wasn't part of the original construction," Bill said as I lit the tip of my wand.

There were lanterns scattered around on shelves and hanging from the ceiling and it took a single wave to light them.

The basement was long and rectangular. In the center was a long table filled with three gently bubbling potions and a complex web of glass tubes, tubing, oddly-shaped flasks, and brightly-hued liquids. Shelves lined three sides of the room, each filled with potion ingredients in neatly labeled in everything from jars and vials to boxes and old milk bottles. One shelf held only a human skull and a pile of muggle paperback romance novels. A workbench, under the shelves on the narrow wall, was filled with neatly arranged devices that had to serve some purpose in potion brewing, but aside from a dozen different mortars and pestles I couldn't identify any of them.

I set the trunk on the floor and used the packing spell to add the contents of the workbench to it, before setting it on the newly cleared workbench.

"Expansion charm?" Bill asked.

I nodded, "Be Prepared. Probably the only useful thing I learned from Dudley's scouting-phase." A phase that had lasted a whole month and ended with Vernon screaming at the Scoutmaster. And the whole time I lived there they said I was the embarrassment. I set the shelves to packing themselves into the trunk, though I left the skull and paperbacks, there were just some things I didn't want to think about.

"Harry," Bill said from where he was examining the contents of the table. "Do you know what this is?"

"Flammable and probably explosive?" I asked.

"Besides that," he said.

"Not really."

He frowned. "Then how did you know what it would do?"

"I saw Neville make something similar once," I said, moving across the room.

A narrow door led to a small narrow room lined with shelves of potions. Large jugs of polyjuice and pepperup lined the bottom shelves. The middle shelves had smaller flasks. One set of shelves immediately on the left was filled with antidotes, starting with a large cask filled with bezoars. The next two were filled with poisons, some mundane, others magical, some that had to be ingested or inhaled, others that worked on contact, some that required two, three, or even four different potions to kill. The back wall was filled with racks of small vials, each carefully labeled with its contents.

"Harry?"

I stepped out of the room and found Bill standing by a silver circle that was sunk into the ground. "What is it?"

He gestured at the circle. "There is a lot of power coming from that thing."

I floated my trunk over and set the potions to packing themselves away. No doubt the oblivators would cover everything over if it came to it, but hundreds of potions mixing when whatever Severus had planned let go wouldn't be pretty and I wasn't sure what they'd do to muggles if they got into the water supply.

"So what do you think this is?" I asked.

"Summoning circle, probably," he said. "What I can't figure out is why it's closed. Normally you'd open a circle—magically, not physically—when you finished. When it's closed it draws, or has, power in it. Also, because of what they're used for, this type of thing represents a very real breach in the wards. I don't know if someone could apparate into it, but there are things that could use it as a gateway."

"Gateway?"

Bill shrugged.

"So what happens if we break it?" I asked.

"All the power in it will get vented into the room in a magic-kinetic burst," he said. "The circle itself is putting out enough power that I can't tell what, if anything, it has inside of it. There could be enough energy hiding in that thing that destroying it could loose enough energy to wipe out everything for miles. If there's anything trapped inside of it it'll be let free."

"What type of entity could it trap?" I asked. "Are we talking about something like a house-elf, or a dementor?"

"Or worse," Bill said. "I had a partner who swore that he saw one once that had been set up as a prison for a nundu in a tomb of a High Priest of Set, but that it had died of old age."

"He's still breaking curses in old tombs?" I asked.

Bill shook his head. "He copped a curse, had his flesh flensed off his bones in a freak localized sandstorm."

"Did that happen often?" I asked, pulling out Severus' wand again.

"Freak localized sandstorms? Not as often as you'd think. Cursebreakers who weren't quite good enough..." he shrugged again.

"Well then," I tossed Severus' wand through the circle. It sailed in, and then bounced on the air over the far side of the circle and clattered down onto the floor.

"Impulsive as ever, Potter!"

A full-sized meaner-than-life Severus Snape glared at us from inside the circle.

"Well?" he demanded. "Prove that you've learned something by sneaking through my things!"

"This is the trap," Bill muttered.



"Yeah," I said. "Only I don't think it wants a little guessing-game this time. Do you have a knife?"

"Always, why?" Bill asked, handing me a pocketknife.

I slid it open and nicked the back of my left arm where it wouldn't hinder me. Bill took the knife from me as I collected my blood in my hand.

"Quickly, Potter, I haven't got all day," Severus sneered.

I flicked a couple drops of blood into the circle. The metal set into the cement floor glowed briefly and Severus' lip curled.

"And once again you've proven that you can lead a student to knowledge, but you cannot make him think," Severus said snidely.

Hmm.

"Maybe," I muttered, taking the photographs out. I knelt next to the circle and slid in the one of Severus and my mother. "I know that you love Lily Evens," I said, standing up and looking at him.

The image's lip curled into something that might have been called a smile by someone half-blind and very generous. "One point to Gryffindor, you have thirty seconds to get out of my house." Severus Snape disappeared and five leather-bound books appeared in the center of the circle.

"Go!" I snapped to Bill. I turned, slammed the trunk closed, and his summoning spell caught it up so quickly that it nearly took my head off. I reached down and grabbed the books, wand, and photograph from the circle, and took off up the step-ladder so quickly that I kicked it over as I came through the trap-door.

Bill had already opened the front door and turned back for me.

"Go," I repeated. With Ron I'd have probably had to push, but Bill just turned and ran, the trunk hovering along behind him like it was a transfigured dog.

There was an ominous thud accompanied by the sound of breaking glass as I crossed the street. A gust of air nearly knocked me off my feet and I turned just in time to see Spinner's End burst into flames.

"Harry," Bill said. "Thank you."

I turned and looked where he was grinning madly. "Excuse me?" I asked.

"That's the most fun I've had in ages," he explained. "There just aren't that many tombs in England with curses that need breaking."

"You, uh, didn't actually get to break any curses though," I said.

"I know, but look."

I turned and looked where he was pointed. Spinner's End was blazing away.

"It's great, isn't it?" he asked enthusiastically.

"Oh," I said. "Great." I pulled out my Auror badge and tapped it. "Travers."

There was a pause. "Emergency, Chief Auror?"

"Not this time," I said. "But Spinner's End is on fire, if you could contact the muggle authorities I would appreciate it." I looked at Bill.

"Fire will burn anything that isn't charmed against it," he said with a shrug.

"Better send somebody in case Severus had anything charmed to withstand fire."

"Clearing out the remains of those potion stores is going to be a mess," Travers' voice sounded grumpy.

"We emptied the component stores, as well as the potion storage," I said.

"Well that's something, are you going to be out much longer?"

"I've got one last thing I need to accomplish this morning, then I'll be in," I said. "Any progress on the Death Eater front?"

"No," Travers said shortly. "Some people are petitioning the Ministry to release Umbridge."

"Already? Damn, I'd hoped that everyone would still be too busy partying," I said. "She stays locked up, Travers."

"I don't have a problem with that, but if the Wizengamot says otherwise—"

"Currently the Wizengamot doesn't get a say," I said, "not unless Kingsley let's them have one. That poisonous toad stays locked up until we can have a nice, fair, legal trial, and can throw her in a cell in Azkaban afterwards. Speaking of which, if there's anyone there with free time on their hands I want an alternative to dementors."

"Dementors have been guardians of the worst sort of wizards and witches for centuries," Travers said.

"Maybe around here, but not anywhere else," I said. "They're dangerous and indiscriminate. Twice I've nearly lost my soul to them, and I can't forget that they attacked a train full of students, a Hogwarts Quidditch game of all things, invaded the grounds of Hogwarts and nearly killed two teachers and three students, and attacked myself and my cousin in the middle of a muggle neighborhood. That aside, your argument about the people they guard is the biggest reason why we should get rid of them. Given half a chance they will flock to whoever can offer them the most souls, whether it's us or yet another Dark Lord, and frankly a dark wizard would be more in line with their tastes than we are."

"People aren't going to like it, Harry," Bill said.

I looked at him.

"A lot of wizards and witches only sleep soundly because the dementors are guarding Azkaban."

"Listen to him, Harry," Travers said.

Hermione said once that most wizards and witches didn't have an ounce of logic. She was only partially correct. The truth was that most wizards and witches didn't have any brains whatsoever. Bill and Travers both seemed to be exceptions to that rule, but arguing about the wisdom of keeping dementors around made me want to scream.

"I'm not saying get rid of them tonight," I said, speaking slowly to keep from yelling. "And quite frankly I don't care how well people sleep because of them. I just want them to be in a position where they are capable of sleep, and placing some of the most dangerous members of our society under the care of...things that would sooner be their allies than their keepers is not something I think will help achieve that goal."

"Fine," Travers said sarcastically. "Where do you want to put that on the list? After over-hauling the Wizengamot but before reshaping magical society?"

"Before the Wizengamot," I replied. "That way the brand-new cells will be ready once the Death Munchers have had their brand-new trials. Heck, Travers, we could just break their wands and send them off to muggle prisons. Who would believe them if they said they were wizards or witches?"

Travers ended the call without replying.

"So what's our last stop?" Bill asked as the sky began to darken again. It looked like it was raining all over England today.

"Number 12," I said.

Number 12 was a grimy-gray Georgian terraced house on a grimy-gray street lined with grimy-gray Georgian terraced houses that had probably last been cleaned in the decade or so before Albus Dumbledore had been born, but just as likely had never been washed at all. The griminess and grayishness were part of the street, worked so deep it could never be cleaned. It was, Ron had once joked, a grim-old place.

"Where is it?" I asked.

Bill frowned, "We know that it is Number 12 so the Fidelius hasn't been recast. I don't remember that white building though, do you?"

Not only did I not remember a white building, but I knew for a fact (unless another building on the street had been hidden by magic and was only now visible) that there hadn't been one. It would have been impossible to miss a clean-white building giving the grimy-gray street lined with grimy-gray buildings.

I walked up to stairs and stared up at the door. "Number 12," I muttered.

"What do you think happened to it?" Bill asked. "I know Mum wanted to clean the outside but it was too dangerous."

"I don't know," I said as I walked up to the door. I touched the knocker and the door flew open.

"Master Harry Potter, Sir," Kreacher squeaked an ominously low squeak as he bowed low and pulled the door wide for us.

"Kreacher," I said faintly as I walked in.

"Whoa," Bill said softly.

"Seconded," I said as I looked around.

Dark wood gleamed everywhere I looked. The chandelier, which before had always been this looming black thing covered in cobwebs, instead glowed gently of polished brass. Two years of effort by Molly, an assortment of Weasleys, and the Order of the Phoenix hadn't managed to make the front hall look half as good as it did now. Even the horrible troll-leg umbrella stand was gone.

"Very nice," I said. "Is the rest of the house..."

"Cleaned, as you ordered, Master Harry Potter, Sir. All save the top floor, that is," Kreacher said earnestly. "Master Sirius brought a hippogriff into the house."

Bill started to laugh, then coughed loudly as Kreacher turned to glower at him.

"Bill, can you check the wards and protections?" I asked.

"Sure," he said. "What do you want done about the Fidelius?"

"Remove it," I said. "Yaxley shared in the secret when he crossed the threshold, which means all the Death Eaters know about it now and the Aurors don't. I'll decide later whether or not to have it recast."

I turned to Kreacher, "How much damage did the Death Eaters do?"

"Very little, Master Harry Potter, Sir," he said. "They searched it quite thoroughly but Kreacher hid the fine china and silverware, and the library, the heirlooms, and Masters' and Mistresses' things. Mostly they waited and watched for Master Harry Potter, Sir, and his friends to return."

"Did they do any damage?"

"Not to the structure," Kreacher said, casting a forlorn glance at Mrs. Black's portrait. "But Mistress hasn't been the same since."

I could have hardly cared less about the portrait but it was obvious that he did so I nodded and tried to look sympathetic.

Kreacher led me down into the kitchen. "Master Harry Potter, Sir, requested that all the Dark Artifacts be gathered together. Heres they are," he said.

The kitchen table, long enough to seat the entire Order, was fully covered with objects. Some, like a crystal decanter that looked like it was half-full of blood, I recognized from my own time spent trying to clean the house. Most of them, including a hand of glory, I did not. On one side of the kitchen were stacks of books of dark magic, each stack with its own label of not only what type of magic it contained (the first one was 'Blood Sacrifices and Burnt Offerings [Non-Sentient]' and I didn't bother to read the others), but also a pair of lists of books, one alphabetical by title, the other by author.

I unshrunk the trunk, then brought out the bookcases and unshrunk them as well.

"I need these kept separate from the rest of the Black library. The books of dark magic go down here the same type of filing would be more than sufficient, see if you can find separate shelves in the library for the rest." I pointed to the bookcase I had taken from Severus' bedroom. "Those go on a separate shelf from the rest, and they all stay together."

Kreacher nodded. "It shall be as you say, Master Harry Potter, Sir."

"Master Harry is sufficient," I said.

Kreacher didn't look happy about that, but he nodded.

"Is there a potion laboratory?" I asked.

Kreacher blinked. "Yes, Master Harry, but it has not been used since Master Regulus' time." He gestured to a very old, very worn door I hadn't noticed before. "It is through there, but Kreacher hasn't gotten to cleaning it yet either."

"That's fine," I said. "See about arranging the components in there. And see if you can find a small closet upstairs of suitable size to turn into a storeroom for the finished potions. I'd just as soon not have to come all the way down here if I need a potion."

"Of course," Kreacher said.

"And better see that the closet is larger than what is needed, I might have more potions joining these shortly," I said. I didn't know what McGonagall intended for Severus' rooms when I left, but a lot of potions on his shelves were not exactly something you'd want to leave laying around a school.

We went back upstairs. Bill had finished chalking a circle with several complicated ruins onto the floor of the dining room. He waved at me as he used his wand to light four candles, and I nodded back, but it looked like he was having fun so I left him to it.

Kreacher led me up to the drawing room. It looked much like I remembered it, only much cleaner. The room was flooded with light from the window which meant that, while it was still dark, it was no longer the heavy, oppressive room that I had known. Unfortunately it also showed just how badly worn the furnishings were.

"The curtains and the furniture have to be replaced, Master Harry," Kreacher said apologetically.

"The wallpaper and the carpeting too, it looks like," I said.

He flicked an ear. "There are wizard spells that can repair it, Master Harry."

I shrugged. "If I'm getting a new couch and drapes I might as well redecorate. How badly is the wear in the rest of the house?"

"About the same as in here, Master Harry, Kreacher has a list..." He produced a large scroll from somewhere and handed it to me.

I set the books Severus left me on the mantle and unrolled it. There was a complete list by room of all the things needed replacing, followed by a similar list of all the things that needed 'wizard magic' to repair.

"I'm not well versed in home repair magic, we're probably going to have to replace everything on the list," I told him, tucking the list away. I pointed towards the Black family tapestry. "I have some decisions to make, Kreacher, one of them is whether to use this as my home or to turn it into a safe-house in case of future trouble. If I do decide to stay here the Black family arms, portraits, and tapestry are going to come down."

"Of course, Master Harry," Kreacher said as though I'd said something blindingly obvious, which I suppose I kind of had. "What will you want done with the Black family things?"

"I haven't decided yet," I said. "Leave them for now. Can you put Andromeda and Sirius back on the tapestry?"

"If you allow it, Master Harry," he said with a frown.

"They were Regulus' family, Kreacher," I said, "and Sirius', which makes them my family. I don't have a whole lot of family to spare."

"Yes, Master Harry, Kreacher will see to it directly."

"You have a nursery and guest room set up?"



"Yes, Master Harry," Kreacher said. "On third floor, the old Black family nursery," he hesitated, then admitted, "Kreacher removed the Black family arms already. Is Mistress Potter to be moving in soon?"

The Mistress Potter-to-be was dead. "No," I said softly, "She." I stopped, took a breath, and said more firmly, "No, there is no Mistress Potter. But my godson will probably end up spending the night sooner or later and I want someplace appropriate ready for him."

"Of course, Master Harry," Kreacher said.

"Is there any other business we need to take care of now?"

"There is the matter of access to the Black vaults for purchase of comestibles and other supplies."

"I have a meeting with Gringotts tomorrow, though I suspect straightening out all of my finances is going to be one of my easier tasks," I said. "Is that all?"

"There is one other thing, Master Harry Potter, Sir," Kreacher said, going to one of the glass-fronted cabinets and opening it. He pulled out a narrow box and brought it back to me. "Kreacher found this when he was cleaning your quarters in Hogwarts."

I frowned at him, "How did you get in?" I asked. Severus was one of the few wizards I knew who hadn't taken house-elves for granted.

"Master Harry gave Kreacher permission to clean," Kreacher said quickly.

I opened the box. Sitting on a piece of green silk was my wand. My holly and phoenix feather wand. "Where?" I asked, picking it up, the wood feeling warm, almost alive, under my touch.

"Under the couch," Kreacher said with a frown. "Master Harry should take better care of his things."

I looked at him quickly. "Was that a joke?" I asked.

"Kreacher doesn't know what Master Harry is talking about," he said earnestly.

"I bet," I muttered. I picked up my things and headed for Bill, who I found standing in the entrance hall by the narrow window next to the door. "How are the wards?"

"The Death Eaters compromised many of them, but that was because Yaxley was brought through the perimeter." He said, still staring outside. "Recasting them is straightforward, just time consuming. If you let me do it there's this rune-scheme I found that removes bones. It doesn't hurt, but since you need bones to do things like move around, talk...breathe..."

"I'll think about it," I said. "What's so interesting out there?"

"Owls," he said, stepping aside.

I looked outside. Everywhere I looked were owls. They sat on fences, on railings, clung to windowsills and drainpipes. Owls swept down the street until the air was so thick with them I couldn't see across the street.

"What do you think they want?"

"You, probably," Bill said.

"Great," I said. I snuck the door open wide enough to stick my wand out and summoned an owl. I got not just one owl, but a whole swarm headed towards the door. I quickly opened it wide enough to snatch one, then shut it, but not before a half-dozen more sneaked in.

I ripped the letter off its leg while the others dropped theirs in a pile at my feet before taking up positions on the banister in front of where the house-elf-head plaques had used to be mounted.

The letter was short, written in a crimped hand that jammed all the words together so that they couldn't be parted. "Grand," I muttered. I didn't need to be able to read it to understand what it was.

"What is it?" Bill asked.

"Fan mail," I said, staring out at the owls. "Flocks of fan mail."

Bill picked it up and grimaced. "Are they all that poorly written?"

"No, but sometimes you wish they were so that you didn't know what they wrote." I turned to Kreacher, "Can you see about releasing these owls without allowing any more inside?"

Kreacher nodded.

"Harry," Bill said, "You do realize the anti-apparation wards are still up, don't you?"

I sighed, "It figures they would be."

"There is floo powder upstairs, Master Harry," Kreacher said.

I came tumbling out of the fireplace in a rush of green flame and explosion of ash. I rolled across the floor a couple of times, heard someone swear as they jumped out of the way, and came up short as I thumped into something hard.

A moment later I heard the fire flare again followed by Bill Weasley's voice saying something his mother would not have approved of.

"What was that?" I asked, pushing myself up. "That was worse than usual." I felt my stomach rebel from the motions inflicted on it, and settled for sitting on the floor as I tried to get it back under control.

"You flooed in from an unsecure fireplace," Travers said. "You had to go through Routing."

I grunted. "I bloody hate the floo." I looked around. I was in the conference room down in Auror Headquarters, the same room where Travers seemed to live. Aside from Travers, myself, and Bill, the only other person present was Percy.

"Are you okay, sir?" he asked, coming over.

"I'm going to hex the next person that calls me 'sir'," I said. "And no, Percy, I am not okay. I had to floo."

"But that was Routing," Percy said.

"Routing only gave me an extra spin or two," I replied.

"You mean you take a tumble every time you use the floo?" Travers asked.

"Only when I have to travel through it," I said, gathering up the books and giving him a look that said Drop It.

"It's about time you got back," Travers said, changing the subject. "I just got off the fire with Muggle Relations. Apparently there is—"

"A flock of owls half a mile wide that seems to be tracking on my location?" I asked. "I noticed it."

Travers nodded. "What do you plan to do with it?"

"I was thinking of burning it," I said sarcastically, I had already decided the muggles might take a cloud of burning owls the wrong way. "Win—"

A familiar house-elf popped into the room next to me before I'd finished speaking. "Master Harry Potter Sir is asking for Winky?"

I glared at the elf but didn't hex her. "I apparently have a great deal of mail, Winky. Could you sort through it for me please?"

"Yes, Master Harry, Winky is being able to be doing that."

"Good. One pile for general fan-mail, one pile for mail with magic on or in it so that it can be checked for poisons, portkeys, and curses, one pile for official mail, one pile for mail from my friends and family, and one pile for letters and packages that you think are important and need to be read. Use your discretion. Can you handle that?"

"Yes, Master Harry, Winky was being doing something similar for Master Crouch."

"Good, better get to it before the muggles start asking questions about flocking owls."

"Yes, Master Harry," she said and vanished with a pop.

"Okay, what next?" I asked as I set my pile of books and stuff on the table.

Travers glared the others out of the room, Percy shutting the door quietly behind him. Once they were gone he reached into his robes and pulled out a small wooden chest. "I have something special for you next, Mister Potter," he said as he opened it and palmed its contents.

He flung a small ball at me, and smirked and said, "Catch," as the familiar hook-behind-the-navel-feeling of a portkey hit me.

The bastard set me up.

## Chapter 7: The Times They Are A-Changin'

The line it is drawn  
The curse it is cast  
The slow one now  
Will later be fast  
As the present now  
Will later be past  
The order is  
Rapidly fadin'.  
And the first one now  
Will later be last  
For the times they are a-changin'.

-Bob Dylan-

I hate portkeys.

Such a simple statement probably isn't on par with high-energy charms or multi-dimensional thaumaturgy, but it is a brilliant statement of fact. Given the severe dearth of facts in the wizarding world it probably has all sorts of profound implications but since I'm not Hermione what those implications are eludes me. However, it doesn't change the fact that I hate portkeys.

I'd just had time for my hate of portkeys to crystallize in my mind when the one Travers' had tossed me brought me to my, or rather its, destination. Once again I missed the landing and ended up flat on my face.

Let me clear something up. Missing a portkey landing is often described as being 'slammed to the ground' or some such nonsense. Since you aren't actually moving, just going from being vertical in one place to being horizontal in another, there really isn't enough momentum to be properly slammed into anything.

It just feels that way.

So after suddenly appearing and feeling as though I'd run face-first into the earth, I rolled left. Something red and loud blasted through the area I'd been in, or would have been in if I'd been able to land properly. Since I'm almost as well known for my proficiency with portkeys as I am for my proficiency with the floo it meant that

whoever ambushed me had either expected me to stick my landing (for once), or hadn't done all their research.

Sloppy, that. Hermione would never have let me get away with it.

I rolled again and ended up behind a tombstone marked Harry Potter, June 16—

Exactly when he lived from until he died are obscured by the stone turning into dust by some curse or other, but the name and day certainly didn't bode well for this Harry Potter.

I tossed up a shield, threw a reductor at the biggest monument I could find behind me in an attempt to throw off my attacker's estimate of where I was, and then lunged for the next nearest chunk of stone to put between me and my attacker.

There was coughing behind me. Hopefully someone was now experiencing the joys of marble dust in the lungs. I tried to disapparate only for it to fail. Anti-apparation ward. Depending on how those are set they can have a number of nasty effects. The worst ones I've ever heard of (Sirius' father was seriously paranoid) act like big razor nets. Apparating through it turns the apparatee into very tiny pieces. Albus', I've been told, feel like you've been hit with a full body-bind. This wasn't anything so complex. It was quicker, short duration, and meant to not attract a lot of attention. Instead of razor wires it felt like being smacked with a cricket bat. Pain flowered behind my left eye and spread out through my body.

I drew the Elder wand with my left hand, using it to conjure a shield that stopped a couple of curses I couldn't identify before returning with a stunner from my normal holly wand. Like the incoming curses the stunner flared against the shield and didn't go through.

Okay, so I couldn't attack and defend at the same time, I was willing to settle for stopping the curses coming my way. Unfortunately the two in front of me were joined by a third flanking from the left, so I faded right and back towards some mausoleums.

This entire situation was insane. Travers couldn't honestly expect to get away with this. Both Percy and Bill would attest that Travers had been alone in the room with me and I hadn't left. As soon as I got back I was going to round up Neville and maybe one of those posse

things on the muggle westerns Dudley used to watch during his 'cowboy' craze—Vernon had, thankfully, put his foot down for once when Dudley demanded a horse. Heck, I didn't even need to bother with it. I just had to let the public know that Travers had attempted to kill Harry Potter and then sit back and watch as they crucified him.

Probably a little harsh, but Tra—wait. Travers...son of a hippogriff. I should have known. One of the Death Eaters had been named Travers. If he wasn't the same one he was probably related and if the Lestranges and Carrows were anything to go by Death Eaters came in broods.

I had some serious housecleaning to do. Fortunately if dragon's blood worked cleaning ovens it should be equally handy at cleaning...other things. Maybe I could see if Charlie had one he could lene me. Have dragonfire take off the top half-inch of slime, heh.

"Going somewhere, Potter?" a voice asked behind me.

I turned and wordlessly cast a banishing spell. A wizard in dark robes and a silver mask—more Death Munchers, fun and joy—made an umph sound as he was slammed into the wall of a crypt. I hit him with a sticking charm, a stunner, this tricky little jinx Hermione found that reversed his left knee joint, and then shattered the other with a bludgeoning curse. I didn't get the jinx quite right; it looked like it had fused the joint together instead. Oh well, beggars, choosers.

A flicker of poisonous green light caught my eye, but the killing curse missed wide to the right and I was on the move again.

It was time to change the game and get some help. Unfortunately there didn't seem to be any handy muggles around to go call the newspapers about a bunch of people in bathrobes flinging bright lights at each other. Fortunately there were ways around that. I pointed my wand at the sky and uttered a spell I'd heard before but had never really felt the urge to try.

"Morsmordre."

The thing worked as advertised, a thick coil of green smoke poured out of my wand and into the air where it formed a skull with a snake



coming out of its mouth. Definitely attention-grabbing. Of course, the Aurors had never managed to respond in time to its sighting before Voldemort took over, but at least it was a start.

For my second trick I tapped my badge and called up Draco.

"What do you want, Potter?" he demanded.

"Go find Hermione, Ron, the other Weasleys, and arrest Travers."

"Arrest Travers," Draco repeated.

"Well I thought about having you insinuate to a reporter that he worked for the Death Munchers and set me up to be killed, but I decided I would rather crucify him myself rather than let someone else do it for me."

Draco was silent for a moment, "You think because his cousin was one—"

"Oh no, I have proof," I said. "He slipped me a portkey and I'm fighting at least three or four of your father's old buddies right now. I mean, black robes, silver masks, killing curses, and big ugly smoke signals and all."

"Why call me?" Draco asked, apparently unconcerned that I was in the middle of a life-or-death fight. "How do you know I won't ignore this call?"

"One, these calls are monitored," I said, I didn't actually know if they were or weren't, but it was a safe bet that he didn't know either, "I'm willing to bet that you can't find and get rid of all the recordings before all hell breaks loose when people realize that the Chosen One is dead.

"Reason two, enlightened self-interest. The only reason your family isn't rotting in a cell in Azkaban, or worse, is because of me. Even if you do get rid of the recordings what do you think is going to happen once I'm gone?"

"Arrest Travers, trust the weasels. Anything else you want, Potter? Take out the trash maybe? Send a rescue squad?"

"Would you?" I asked. "Tell them to look for the floating skull and snake over a cemetery."

A Death Eater stepped out from behind a mausoleum and started to yell "I found him!"

He got as far as the second word before I hit him with a summoning charm, then a banishing charm as he flew towards me. I told Draco I had to go, closed the connection, and summoned the Death Eater over again, following up with a body-bind and a tickling charm from the Elder Wand—have you ever been tickled while unable to move? It is seriously unpleasant—then stomped on his wand for good measure.

There was an open grave nearby and I half considered burying him but I didn't have time for that. There was a pile of dirt under a green tarp and I levitated the tarp, then the sod beneath it, stashed the Death Eater on the dirt and quickly charmed the sod and tarp back into place. I tossed around a few reductor curses—did you know that if you concentrate and have two wands you can fire the curse twice at the same time?—for ambience, and tossed a long-burning fire-spell into the open grave for good measure and then it was time to move again.

There was a shout from behind me.

I moved faster.

Ideally I needed to find the edge of the anti-apparation jinx, instead I had cover. Having great big things to duck behind is great, but it also has two downsides. First, it cut off my line of sight. Second, the Death Munchers were in among the crypts and mausoleums as well. I ducked behind one mausoleum, circled a second, and then tossed an off-hand banishing spell at the ground and promptly found myself in the air.

Okay, that sucked. I probably just made myself a big target for anyone who was watching that wasn't stuck in among the houses of the dead and decaying, but more problematically one of said house's stone roofs was rushing up at me.

Unlike the portkey it really did feel like I slammed into something stone. No curses came at me, however, so I put up with the bruises and peeked over the edge.

Stupid Death Muncher wasn't looking up. Heh.

I grabbed a broken branch, thought for a moment, and then transfigured it into a flower pot filled with dirt and a transfigured a leaf into geranium for inside of it. One hover charm later—selected because you don't have to consciously maintain it like you do a levitation charm—and a banishing spell and the Death Eater slumped to the ground. Before you ask, no, I didn't choose the flower pot because of Dudley's Saturday morning cartoons or some traditional thing. I did it because after listening to every variation of Potter that people could possibly come up with over the last sixteen years, using a flower pot was...poetic. Maybe it could be my new trademark spell, Potter's Flower Pot of Pain.

I jumped down from the roof, the Death Eater made a convenient cushion to jump down onto...just as another Death Muncher came around the corner. Fool I was, I froze.

"Crucio!"

Needless to say the Death Eater didn't.

I flinched, expecting to once again the worse pain a human can feel...only I didn't. The spell hit me and did nothing. The Death Eater started to bring up his wand again when a cat-hole appeared in a marble wall in the crypt to my right and Pixel exploded out of it. She was hissing like, well, an enraged cat, and her fur was standing up so that she looked like she'd about tripled in size.

She jumped, clawed her way up his robes as easily as she had streaked across the ground, and claws flashed as she exploded into his face like a berserk buzz-saw. The Death Eater brought his wand around but a disarming spell took care of that and she rode him to the ground as I summoned the wand and snapped it like I had the others. I turned away to find the one wand of the Death Eater I dropped the pot on and broke it as well.

Someone would probably bitch about me destroying evidence or something. Screw them, I was fighting for my life here and so many

purebloods are helpless with their wands. Makes me wonder why exactly they think they're so much better than muggles if taking away their wand is all that it takes to drop them down to that level.

The Death Eater on the ground was screaming and trying to throw Pixel off, but she had latched her teeth into his arm and sunk her claws in so he wasn't accomplishing much.

I tried to hit him with a stunner but he was moving too much and Pixel was in the way, which is when his partner ducked around a corner and hit me with the Cruciatus. You'd think sooner or later they'd realize it doesn't work on me any more and give it up. I fired a pair of stunners, an impediment jinx, and a disarmer in rapid succession. He blocked the first two, dodged the third, and then tossed his wand into the air with a little flick so that when my last curse hit him it didn't do anything. He caught the wand and retaliated with something that was bright, orange, and ugly-looking. I dodged to my side as I watched the wall of a crypt burst into flames—not flame-charring, mind you, the stone was actually burning.

I didn't have much left in my bag of tricks so I reached for something I hadn't tried before. The previous summer when I had been at the Weasleys on the day before Bill's and Fleur's wedding, Ginny and I had managed to escape from her mother. We'd gone to the pond and she'd spent a couple hours teaching me her bat-bogey hex. An early miss-cast on my part had led to my first foray into spell creation. The result was, when I pointed my wand and cried out the words, bogies started to stream out of his nose and form into tiny bats that assaulted him...but only after they had burst into gobs of flame.

The Potter-Weasley Flaming Snot-Bat Hex had its first field trial and got a ten-wand rating as the man tried to extinguish his burning clothing.

The other man had rolled to his knees by this point and slammed Pixel face-first into a crypt, then used his other hand to pull her off and fling her away. He went for a second wand, but I was already calling up another spell. Unlike the Potter-Weasley Flaming Snot-Bat Hex this was one I'd seen used...once. I'd looked it up later, but had never practiced it.

There was a sharp crack, a puff of smoke, and instead of a ferret there was a thing that looked like a mangy cross between a squirrel and a dachshund, lying on the ground.

It probably wasn't a surprise that it hadn't worked. I mean, I'm better at the practical than the theory, but human transfiguration wasn't covered until seventh year transfiguration and I'd spent all of my seventh year living in a tent chasing down Horcruxes and avoiding Death Eaters.

"Banner!" screamed the Death Eater besieged by flaming snout-bats. "Banner, banner, banner."

I started to curse him again but felt an increasingly all-too-familiar tug—

—and slammed into the floor of my office.

Draco, Arthur, and Bill were waiting for me, along with Travers who was sitting in a chair. Only Draco had his wand out and it was quietly, but firmly, covering Travers.

"That took a bit longer than expected," Travers said. "Will you call off your pet Death Eater now?"

I blinked, "What?" I mean, I'd heard Severus referred to as Albus' 'pet Death Eater'—mostly by Order members, but there had been a few others. But Severus' and Malfoy's situations weren't remotely...oh sweet and merciful Merlin, they were.

"It was a training scenario, Harry," Bill explained. "Ron told me about it last night. I understand that it looks and feels realistic, but I suppose that isn't really surprising."

"A training scenario?" I asked. "Bill, they were flinging around the Killing and Cruciatus curses like they were candy."

"Under controlled circumstances, yes," Bill said. "I asked. They make sure to aim well away with the Killing curse and the Cruciatus doesn't exactly cause any permanent damage?"

"You've heard about Frank and Alice Longbottom, haven't you?" I asked.

"That was a very different situation," Arthur said quickly.

"Only if you know the people in masks aren't going to torture you into insanity," I said. "Now why did whoever it was start screaming 'banner'?"

Travers blinked at me, "It was the emergency word. It immediately ends the training scenario if something dangerous or a bad injury happens. What happened?"

"Boss," someone called, slamming my officer door open. "Boss, Potter just—" Williamson, dressed in Death Eater robes though without the mask or hood, froze when he saw me.

"Yes," I asked coolly, "Just what has Potter done now?"

"You nearly killed Dawlish," he informed me.

Poor Dawlish, the man just could not get a break.

"Did you?" Travers demanded.

"Did I what?" I demanded right back. "I found myself in a fight with Death Eaters so I bloody well defended myself."

"You transfigured him into...something!" Williamson retorted. "The Healers are attempting to reverse it now but they don't think it's likely. And Lew Carol is badly burned and the Healers say they're not sure they can put Proudfoot's leg to rights."

"Human transfiguration?" Bill asked, sounding impressed. "That's—"

"Really difficult, I know," I said. "Also doesn't usually work, it takes too long and is too easy to block or we'd have just transfigured the Death Eaters into lumps of coal and been done with it." They definitely deserved it for Christmas, but I doubted that that particular custom had made the transition from muggle to magical world.

Arthur frowned at me, "Harry, human transfiguration is dangerous at the best of times. You spent all of last year, when you normally—"

"I am aware of what we missed," I seethed. "I thought he was a Death Eater, and he hurt Pixel," I added.

"Who?" Williamson asked.

"My cat," I said. "He slammed her into a crypt and then threw her."

Williamson's face was starting to turn an unhealthy purple and I held up my hand before he could retort.

"I thought I was under attack and...I'm really tired of losing people I care about," I said. "If it helps the Healers I was attempting to turn him into a ferret, and as for...Carol, I think you said, I was trying a joint reversing spell."

Williamson gave me an ugly look, then turned around and slammed his way out of my office.

I crossed to my desk, letting my wands fall out of my hands onto it before collapsing into the chair.

"If you'll call off Malfoy now," Travers said coolly, "I'll go see how much of a mess you made of your Aurors."

"Tell us about your cousin first," I said.

He gave me a dark look. "My cousin's side of the family and mine both agreed that changes needed to be made in the wizarding world. We didn't agree on the methods, or even what changes needed to be made. End of story." He didn't bother waiting for me to say anything to Draco, just shouldered him aside as he stormed out of the room.

"We should be getting back to work," Arthur said carefully.

I nodded distractedly and he left, followed by Bill who promised to go look for Pixel.

"So you already did that little test?" I asked after a moment of uncomfortable silence.

"Sure," he said. "I made a portkey and got out. They weren't expecting Father to have taught me how to do that."

The fireplace flared and a moment later Kingsley stepped out. "Harry, I just got off the fire with one of our muggle-relations experts. There was a disturbance in a London cemetery not ten minutes ago. It included the presence of the Dark Mark—"

"Ten minutes, huh," I said. "We need to work on that response time." Kingsley looked at me and I shrugged. "It's probably nothing."

"Excuse me?" Kingsley asked.

"Travers came up with this test thing, dropped me into a running spell-battle with a half-dozen Aurors dressed up as Death Eaters. There was probably some kind of muggle repulsion field up so I sent up the Dark Mark to get above that. I was hoping for some help. Instead I got told off for nearly killing one of them. I'll probably get told off again for seriously injuring several more."

"Several more?" Draco asked.

I shrugged.

"You mentioned a failed joint-reversal spell," he said.

I sighed and nodded.

"And burns?"

"Burns?" Kingsley asked.

I shrugged again.

"Want to talk about it?" Kingsley asked.

"Sure, Kingsley, I'd love to talk about it," I said broad smile. "My name is Harry Potter and I'm messed up because this bad man was trying to kill me since I was one. I killed him a couple of days ago and I feel really, really bad about it."

"I think I'm going to be ill," Draco said, making a face.

"Draco, get lost."



"Of course, mon Capitaine," he said, giving this sarcastic little bow before showing himself out of my office.

"What's there to talk about Kingsley?" I asked.

Kingsley was silent for a moment. "I know what happened yesterday was an accident, Harry. But considering what I just heard, I'm worried about you. If you start killing first—"

"Is that what you think I'm doing?" I asked coolly.

"It is a disturbing trend," Kingsley said carefully. "I'm not blaming you, mind, and I doubt anyone is going to confess to being disappointed in you for killing You-Know-Who—"

"Merlin, not you too."

"Voldemort." He grinned suddenly, "You start not using his name because of the Taboo and it becomes a habit. As I was saying, nobody is unhappy that you killed him, but—"

"But I didn't kill him," I said flatly.

Kingsley paused. "You didn't?" he asked. "I thought—"

"You thought, everyone thought, wrong," I said. "I didn't kill him. I just...bounced his killing curse back at him."

Kingsley whistled softly. "Can you teach that trick?"

"No," I said, "But it's easy enough to learn. You just have to become intimately acquainted with the Killing curse...from the receiving end. It's not something I would recommend of course, but there it is. The fact is I didn't kill anyone until yesterday and that was an accident, though I suppose if you wanted to be technical you could blame me for Quirrel's death as well as Voldemort's. I didn't actually do the killing, mind you, but I....created the situation where his death was inevitable."

"How many people know about that one?" Kingsley asked.

"That are still alive?" I asked. "I don't know, maybe a half dozen or so that I've told the story to, you, whoever Albus told, and the people that any of them have told."

Kingsley was silent for a long while. "You can't keep having accidents, Harry."

"Just what is that supposed to mean?"

"If people start to see you as a killer, someone who is more likely to kill a suspected dark wizard rather than arrest him, either by accident or design, it will seriously damage your reputation."

"I don't intend to ever kill anyone by accident again," I said firmly.

Kingsley started to reply, then stopped. "I'm not sure I care for how carefully that was worded," he said.

"And I'm not sure how you want me to respond to that," I said.

"Harry..." Kingsley began, then apparently thought better of it because he sighed. "If the public decides that you're, well, another Mad-Eye Moody, more willing to bring a criminal in dead than alive—"

"Dragon dung, Kingsley," I said. "All my life, at least since I found out about magic, it's been Dark Lord this, Death Eaters that, the First War, the Second War, the War against Grindelwald. Make up your mind. Am I a soldier fighting a war, or am I bobby trying to bring a hoodlum in?"

"Am I supposed to stop them by whatever means I have to in order to keep people safe, or do you want me to wait until they actually do something and then go, investigate, and do nothing because they've already disappeared away? Can I just have my people open up and drop the bastards, maybe alive or maybe dead, or do we have to wear brightly colored uniforms that say 'curse me' and walk down Diagon Alley announcing ourselves in broad daylight and giving 'ample warning'? You can't have it both ways. We're either soldiers, or we're police. Not both"

"Did it ever occur to you that the people you have working for you might not be soldiers?" Kingsley asked.

"And maybe that's why Voldemort took over the Ministry," I said. "Maybe what we really needed were a bunch of Alistair Moody's willing to bring in Death Eaters dead if that's what it took."

"It's not that simple," he said.

"When is it ever?" I asked. "How did we get on this topic of conversation anyway?"

"You put three of your Aurors in St. Mungos," he said with a frown.

"I put three people who were dressed like Death Eaters, were attacking me like Death Eaters, and were using similar spells as Death Eaters, in St. Mungos," I said. "You didn't like that. Apparently I was supposed to inform them they were all under arrest and demand they come quietly."

"I never said that," he said. "Look, Harry, you're obviously upset—"

"Upset?" I asked. "Upset. Upset doesn't begin to cover it, Kingsley! Every year for the past seven years, with the possible exception of my third year at Hogwarts, Voldemort or one of his minions has tried to kill me. I've had friends tortured, brutalized, and murdered by his followers. With a very few exceptions that I don't even need all my fingers to name, everyone I've met prior to a couple of days ago that has worked in this place has done their best to make my life miserable, or worse. I've had dementors sent after me, and then persecuted for defending myself against them. I've been slandered, called insane, deluded, and a liar. The Ministry sent a toad to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts, but instead of teaching she sacked teachers, dispensed truth serums like they were pepper-up potions, forced students to use blood quills until they were scarred, and justified the use of the Cruciatus on students. Scrimgeour couldn't have her sacked, oh no, he kept her on while using the same tactics that had gotten Sirius a twelve-year all-expenses-paid vacation in the resort prison of Azkaban, and trying to get me to be his cute little morale-boosting puppet. The toad he wouldn't sack just spent most of the past year directing the Ministry's crusade against muggle-borns. One of my Aurors, just to bring things back around, almost lost her father due to that bitch's work; he was, in fact, reported dead months ago, and he may still die.

"I spent a large portion of my fifth year, when I wasn't carving 'I won't tell lies' into my hand, doing her job teaching Defense because she wouldn't. Less than three days ago more than a third of those people I taught were killed. Ten people—eleven if you count Justin who no one has seen or heard from in months—many of them I've known since my first year. We lost more people in proportion than any other group at the Battle of Hogwarts. The only ones of us who weren't injured were the ones who weren't there...a grand total of four, including Justin. You remember the bit with Marietta, Zach Smith ran, and Dennis Creevey was deemed too young by McGonagall and sent away with the younger students.

"The man who was the closest thing to an uncle I had was killed. One of my closest friends was killed. My girlfriend was killed and I can't even go to her funeral. Upset doesn't even begin to describe how I feel, Kingsley," I concluded.

"Feel better?" he asked impassively.

I shrugged, "a little...maybe."

"Good, find someone to vent to, it helps," he said. "But not me, I don't have time to hold your hand."

"I didn't ask you to," I said coldly, but there was very little energy in it.

Kingsley crossed to where a window frame had been hung in my office. It was a great big one, looking down from a London skyscraper. "Looks like a sudden storm is brewing," he commented before turning back to me. "Okay, Harry, if you had to choose soldier or cop, how would you play it?"

"You want my ideas?" I asked.

"You usually have good ones," he said. "Not always practical, but they're usually...unique. I had an interesting talk with a goblin earlier...your doing, I presume?"

I nodded.

"So...thoughts?"

I shrugged, "We have a year where everything we, by which I mean you, say goes. Let's use it."

"And when that year is over, then what?" he asked. "A new government is just going to emerge from the woodwork?"

"That's your job, Kingsley."

"No, it's our job," he said sternly. "I need your help on this, Harry. But if you sour the public to you having you as part of the Ministry is going to be more of a hindrance than a help. You can't trade terror for terror and by targeting the purebloods that's just what you're doing."

"I'm not just targeting the purebloods," I snapped. "I'm targeting the Death Eaters' support. It's not enough to take out the Death Eaters, whether it's sticking them in prison or killing them. We have to...tear out the rot, the type of thinking that condones and supports their vision of what society should be. If we don't it's like a weed. Rip of the stem and leaves and it'll come back. You have to destroy the roots as well."

Kingsley gave me a blank look. "Are you listening to yourself?" he asked after a moment. "You're talking about doing the same thing Voldemort did, only instead of rounding up muggle-borns you want to imprison people who think like he does. The idea is...insane, we're supposed to be the good guys and you want to resort to the same tactics you just accused Fudge and Scrimgeour of using."

"I didn't say that," I protested.

"No?" he asked. "In your little vision of the future where would people like Draco Malfoy belong?"

Well...fuck. "Damn you for making this more complicated than it had to be," I muttered.

Kingsley snorted. "I'm not the one making this complicated, you're the one trying to make things simple. That doesn't work in real life, Harry."

"Fine, it's the wrong call," I said. "But what's the point of having the power to clean up this mess if we're not going to use it."

"I wouldn't have thought, given how close you and Dumbledore were, to be advocating that we...use the power we have."

"Well, I suppose we could sit on it and expect it to lay phoenix eggs or something," I said, "but since we had it I figured we might as well actually do something worthwhile with it."

"And just how would you go about using that power?"

"How would I know, Kingsley?" I asked. "End hunger, create a workable solution for world peace, save the whales...maybe buy everybody a puppy. Oh wait, I know, get rid of the corruption and the prejudice in magical society so that my godson doesn't have to grow up with it the way I did."

"What made you think that wasn't my goal as well, Harry?" Kingsley asked softly.

"I don't know," I admitted. I took a deep breath and let it out. "Okay, let me ask this. Why are you so hot on public perception? I can understand doing it to keep them the nice docile sheep they are right now, but there's something more you have in mind."

"You need to think long-term, Harry," Kingsley said. "The Death Eaters are an external threat. The bigger one, as you pointed out, are the 'roots', the society that agrees with their goals if not necessarily their methods. What we need is a legislature—the Wizengamot—that not only agrees with our goals and purposes, but will actively work with us towards them. We need a judicial body, one that is fair and competent, and likewise willing to work towards those goals, especially if you ever want to be able to give the Death Eaters trials.

"And finally we need both of those sooner rather than later. The sooner we have a Wizengamot the sooner we appear legitimate to the everyday wizard and witch, and the more time the new Wizengamot has to feel their way into their positions before they have to start doing the job for real, the better. The same goes for the new judiciary and for similar reasons. Sure you can hold Umbridge without a trial, at least for the next year, but the longer you do that the longer it appears that you are using the same tactics as Fudge

and Scrimgeour, irregardless of whether or not you are planning on giving her a trial."

I nodded in reluctant agreement. It wasn't as...simple as my plans had been, but he was right. I had been headed for the same, flawed, solutions that Fudge and Scrimgeour had used, and for worse reasons. Fudge and Scrimgeour had locked people up without trials because they saw them as threats. I had just advocated doing the same to the Draco Malfoys of the world simply because I couldn't see a place for them in it. I had given Draco a job because Albus and Severus had seen something in him, and because I wanted him where I could keep an eye on him. It wasn't possible for me to do the same with all of the people who thought like him, and, as Shackbolt had pointed out, simply arresting them and locking them up would make me no better than Voldemort.

That wasn't really an option, which only left me with the question of how to actually do my job. Isolating the Death Eaters from any support still seemed like the best first step, but how it was done depended on the question I still didn't have an answer for. Was I a soldier fighting—leading or commanding now, I suppose—a war, or was I a cop? Fortunately there was a chance I could do both.

"Hermione and I talked about this over the last year," I said. "The muggles have some great rules where warfare is concerned. Did you know that the deliberate targeting of civilians, murder and the like, is a capital crime? We could give each one a short, legal, military trial...and then hang them."

Kingsley gave me a look that said the solution was the last one he wanted. "And if you were a law enforcement officer instead of a soldier?" he asked.

Lucky me that was something else Hermione had talked about.

"What Voldemort and his followers attempted to do was a political act," I said. "The methods they used were of terror, fear, and oppression, but their goals, a society where pure-blood wizards and witches ruled and muggle-borns were done away with, were purely political. I suppose technically we could bring charges of treason, sedition and insurrection, things like that, but those too are political charges since they're crimes against a legitimate government."

Kingsley nodded slowly. "I understand your reasoning, Harry, but where are you going with this? I assume you're talking about involving the Wizengamot in some way, possibly even the Queen?"

"Actually," I said, "I'm not. Actually I'm going exactly the opposite way. Look, Voldemort and his Death Eaters got support from those witches and wizards who agreed with their political goals, right? Housing, new recruits, money, magical devices, all sorts of other things. What I'm thinking of is stop making this about politics, about...lifestyles and forms of government. No charges of being Death Eaters, no charges about supporting Voldemort, no charges of anything...political. I'd brand them as criminals, get the press behind it, stop making this about anti-muggles and anti-muggleborn, and instead portray them as a gang of psychopathic murders. I'd call them criminals and put them on trial as such. Totally ignore the political message they were trying to send."

"That didn't exactly work for the muggles, Harry."

"Not immediately, no, but it worked well enough," I said. "Look, Kingsley, it comes down to the same thing. If we try them as insurrectionists or whatever, we give them a little that legitimacy you harped about—at least in the eyes of those who support them. The same thing would happen, of course, if we decided they were soldiers and treated them as such, but in that case we could be a lot more...permanent with them. The last real option we have is to brand them common criminals, it's not as quick as it would be if we hung them, but it also avoids giving them a...political victory."

"Those are the only three options I see. We can't mix and choose, let them be one thing today and something else tomorrow. It is also a decision that needs to be made now. I'd prefer to go the 'soldier' route, I started that the other day when I had the properties they'd used burned. In many ways I think it is the least complicated, and having a military trial where we can control the verdict avoids any complication that could come in the judiciary let's them off and we have to interfere."

"The whole reason for having a judiciary is to prevent the kind of abuse you just suggested, Harry," Kingsley said sternly.

"A whole lot of Death Eaters got away last time because they bought or threatened their way out of Azkaban," I said. "If the same thing



happens are you willing to just let them walk free because you aren't willing to use all the powers that you currently have? Oh, I'll go after any judge—or whatever you come up with—who does, but I'm not going to let them get away with it either. My concern is that if they do, and then we have to do something, it'll give the impression that the judiciary is, well, no more independent than the last one we had. Even if we give them new trials it'll appear as though we're on a witch hunt...or wizard hunt as the case may be."

Kingsley didn't smile at the small joke so I pressed on. "In any case it's a decision that needs to be made soon, immediately really. And then it's a decision that we're all going to have to stick with."

"That sounds an awful lot like an ultimatum," Kingsley observed.

"If either of us had been thinking we would have discussed it before," I said, "but we damn well have to have a plan, or at least the beginnings of one, when we go your little meeting tomorrow. Don't we?"

"And what do we tell her when she asks why we didn't settle this before?" he asked. "As you said, we let a lot of his followers walk free after the last...conflict."

"Tell her the truth. Tell her that the previous Ministers were incompetent fools."

"Funny," he said with a snort, "not exactly in keeping with proper protocol, mind you, but funny." He gave me a long look and asked softly, "How are things going here otherwise?"

"I'm making it up as I go along, what did you think I was doing?" I asked. "I don't have a clue how to be an Auror. I was supposed to be training this afternoon but apparently that's now off my schedule. Percy probably has something like 'Introduction to Ministerial Parchment-work' that he wants to teach me but that I've been avoiding."

"In that case I'm going to call a meeting in about two hours between myself, Department heads, and a few heads from the major sub-departments. You're right. We need to have a plan or at least a working outline of what we want to accomplish. I, we, all of us have been reacting. We need to be more proactive."

"Well, it'll be nice to have some direction as to what I'm supposed to do," I said. "I want to get my cat and make sure she's all right first, and then I'm going to go visit those people I put in St. Mungos."

Kingsley nodded. "We'll be in the conference room on the same floor as my office. I'm sure you know where it is."

"I can find it," I said as a cat-hole opened in the wall and Pixel limped out. I stood and went over to her, and she made a pained meow as I carefully picked her up.

"May I?" Kingsley asked, drawing his wand.

I looked at him.

"O on Care of Magical Creatures N.E.W.T." he said. "Thought it might come in handy against dark beasts, but it seems all I ever use it for is healing this animal or that that my daughters bring home...mostly bunnies and very few ever need more than a good anti-flea charm."

I nodded and he came over and waved his wand over her while chanting softly. "Broken right shoulder," he said, before starting another spell that sounded similar to some that I'd heard Madam Pomfrey use at various times. "That should do it," he said finally. "Try to keep her still for a couple of days, but if she wants to move around, let her."

I nodded. "Thanks."

He smiled, "It wasn't a problem, Harry. It's nice to have the opportunity to use magic for something other than destroying things or doing parchment-work."

"Fair enough," I said. "Um, could you send a messenger-patronus to Bill?"

"You can't?" he asked, clearly surprised.

"It was one trick I never quite worked out, and since Hogwarts..." I shrugged. "A happy memory isn't enough to work the spell, you have to be able to immerse yourself in it, remember exactly how you felt

at the time. Needless to say Happy Harry memories were in short supply.

"I'll see to it," he said after giving me a searching look. He nodded to me and showed himself out.

I stared at the window into London for a while as I rubbed purple goo into Pixel's wound. Draco was lounging against one of the cubicles right by my office door when I opened it. He looked at me, then turned back to buffing his nails on his robe.

"Meeting," I said. "Conference room down the hall from the Minister's office. You and I, one hour."

He looked surprised, but I did my best Severus impression (none too good) and swept past him before he could say anything else. I ducked into the conference room. Percy and Lavender were mirroring each other on either side of the table. Percy's side was filled with thick tomes and scrolls of parchment in neatly arranged stacks, while Lavender's was filled with a clutter of sketches and colored ink pots.

"You're still here, Lavender?"

"It's a convenient place to work, I can ask questions and solicit feedback, and it's quiet," she said. "What do you need now? Muggle formal-wear?"

"Probably in the future, but not right now," I said.

Pixel leapt gingerly from my arms to the table, which she padded across to Lavender, hopped down into my former classmate's lap, and began purring loud enough to be heard from across the room.

"I never knew you as a cat person," Lavender said.

"She sort of adopted me," I said. "She's supposed to take it easy, besides the obvious wound she just had her shoulder repaired. Given the number of bones I've broken and had fixed I can testify that it takes a lot out of you."

"And idea what breed she is?" Lavender asked, reaching down with one hand to stroke Pixel's spine.

The purring got louder.

"Something magical?" I asked with a shrug. "All I know is that she can walk through walls. Can I leave her here with you?" I asked.

Lavender shrugged, then looked down at Pixel and nodded. "As long as she doesn't try to help me," she said with a grin.

I used my office floo to go to Grimmauld Place where I tumbled out in privacy, before apparating to safe point conveniently close to St. Mungos. I used my badge to get past the mannequin, walked through the waiting room quickly enough that no one stopped me, and caught the lift up to the fourth floor (spell damage et al.).

The floor had been expanded since the last time I'd been there. Seven long halls met at a central hub, where there was a seven-sided counter with harried medi-witches sitting behind it. The halls had doors, each with a sign indicating one ward or another in various colors that probably meant something to the various Healers. I stopped one witch behind the desk for directions. It took my badge, a look at my scar, and a written authorization—also sometimes called an autograph—but I got a list of the wards I wanted to visit, and how to find them.

The Aurors had all been clustered together in a ward of their own. A Healer was just coming out when I arrived. He gave me a bleary look through bloodshot eyes and told me I couldn't go in.

I pulled out my badge.

He looked at it closely, then blinked up at me. I sighed and moved a fringe of hair out of the way of my scar. "I-I'm s-sorry, H-Harry, er, A-Auror P-Potter," he said in a stutter that reminded me of Quirrel, only where Quirrel had always seemed nervous this seemed more of an impediment...or maybe it was just irreversible spell damage. "B-but I n-need Authorization f-f-first."

I sighed and signed my name to a scrap of parchment which he very happily pocketed.

"Auror L-ew-ew C-Carol is d-doing f-f-fine," he said. "H-he can b-be released-d-d-d short-ortly. W-we r-removed f-four bones from Prou-Prou-ou—"

"Proudfoot," I said.

He gave me a look, "His l-leg. W-we w-will have h-him put-ut-ut b-back to r-rights b-b-by morning."

"What about Dawlish?"

"S-s-some idiot t-ried t-to t-t-trans-transfigure h-him into a f-ferret," the Healer said. "I-it w-was t-touch and g-go, b-b-but once w-we knew w-what had happened-pened-d-d w-we w-were able to fix him r-right up-p-p. H-he j-just needs to shave off his fur."

"Right," I said. I considered asking him if they were in their own ward for security or for some other reason, decided it didn't really matter and would probably be nearly incomprehensible, nodded to him, and went in.

Dawlish was easy to identify, he was the only one covered with brown fur. A second Auror I vaguely remembered from Tonks' security detachment at Hogwarts was in the bed next to him with a book. The third one had to be Carol, but I couldn't tell if I recognized him or not since his entire face was lathered with a glowing blue paste which had small, green, sparkling crystals in it.

"Sir," Dawlish said in a strangled voice that sounded like I was using magic to forcibly extract teeth.

"Dawlish," I said. What the hell do you say to a guy you tried to transfigure into a weasel? I couldn't think of anything off the top of my head. "Healers say you can get out of here and shave the fur off."

He glared at me.

I turned to Proudfoot, "Sorry about the leg."

He grimaced, "I'll be all right."

"Skele-Gro?" I asked.

"You asked the Healer?"

"I have experience with it," I said. I gestured towards the limp-looking ridge in the blanket. "I broke an arm playing Quidditch my second year. My DADA professor insisted on healing it, instead he removed all the bones in the arm."

"Lockhart?" he asked with another grimace.

I nodded.

"He always was a screw-up," Dawlish said. "Except with oblivious charms, he was an excellent obliviator."

Proudfoot and Carol made sounds of agreement.

"Did he do the hand to?" Proudfoot asked.

"And the scapula, and half the collarbone," I said.

He winced, "Healers left the foot and hip. They said that the only thing they really needed to remove was everything in the knee but Skele-Gro can sometimes behave...oddly when it has to fix rather than replace a bone so they took out the leg bones as well."

I turned to Carol. "They also say you'll be out of here shortly."

"I wasn't burned that bad," he said in a surprisingly friendly voice. "Hurts, of course, burns always do...what was it, by the way? I never saw that spell before."

I shrugged. "It's a modification of a prank." I said, which was true enough, in a way, without having to go into the whole truth.

"Dangerous prank, setting people on fire like that."

"Oh the original didn't have the flaming gobs of snot," I said. I paused and added a flippant, "It's just, you know, everything's better where there's fire involved."

It got a chuckle, but there didn't seem to be anything else to say after that so I left. I walked to the end of the hall and made a left into

the corridor that went around the circumference of the floor. A door on the right led to the ward that held the wounded survivors of the DA. Lavender's injury had been both the worst (if you didn't count those that were dead), bad enough that the first news I'd had about her was that she was expected to die. Typical of the wizarding world's perverse sense of humor she'd also been the easiest for the medi-witches, -wizards, and Healers to, well, heal.

The room was six-sided including the side the door was in. Alicia, Ernie, Angelina, Cho, and Hannah each had a bed and their own wall. Each had their own collection of brightly colored spheres floating around above their beds, and shelves full of silvery magical devices that whirled, or whirred, or emitted tiny puffs of colored smoke. All of which probably meant something to the Healers, but only reminded me of the Headmaster's (or Headmistress' as the case may be) office at Hogwarts when Albus Dumbledore was still alive.

None of them looked at me right away so I tried to figure out how they were arranged. It might have been wound severity, but I couldn't read the silver instrument-things and magic doesn't always leave visible wounds. It took me a moment to realize they were in alphabetical order by last name going from right to left (not reverse-alphabetical order going left to right which would have amounted to the same thing, but in a more logical way).

"Harry?"

I turned, Alicia's voice was a dry rasp.

"Hey, Alicia," I said. I cocked my head to the side, "You've looked better."

She gave me a sour look, though the teal-colored goop that was oozing from a bandage around her head took from it.

"Now," I said, "from my experience, I know that the most annoying question I can possibly ask you is, 'how do you feel?' Since I have a pretty good idea, speaking, again, from past experience, I know the answer to said question is 'how do you think I feel?' So instead I'm only going to ask if you feel better than you did yesterday?"

She rolled her eyes, then nodded tiredly.

"Good, see, you're getting better," I said. "We'll have you back up on a broom in no time."

"Hey Harry."

The others had all looked up and were watching me, but only Hannah was sitting up in her bed. In fact she had several pillows behind her propping her up and she had an open book in her lap. In the wizarding world the fact that she looked the healthiest was probably a sign that she was the worst off.

"Hannah," I said.

She looked at the door, then back at me and smiled. "Finally trading in on your fame?" she asked in a soft, weak-sounding voice. Soft was normal for her, weak was not.

"My fame?" I asked.

"They haven't allowed us visitors," she explained.

"Oh," I said. "I didn't ask."

"What's been happening?" Ernie asked from his bed.

"What do you know?" I asked.

"Nothing," Hannah said. "Nobody's told us anything except that we won at Hogwarts. Angie is pretty sure Fred is dead, and we know Lavender was badly hurt but since she isn't here we're pretty sure she's dead too. Other than that..." she shrugged.

"We won at Hogwarts," I said. "Voldemort's dead. Unlike last time that claim was made we have a body make of that what you will. I haven't felt anything from my scar—" no sense in mentioning the nightmare "—so I suppose it's better than even odds that he's gone for good this time. Along with him we captured or killed most of his supporters. Some, most notably Bellatrix Lestrange, escaped.

"As far as the DA goes...Lavender is alive. She can't walk; some kind of spine injury. I don't know enough about medical magic to say



if it's something that can be fixed once more of the emergency patients are out of the Healers' way. Justin is still missing—"

"Which probably means he's dead," Ernie said flatly. Ernie and Justin had been, were, best friends. Odd considering that they were, respectively, ninth-generation pureblood and exceedingly well-off muggleborn. It was probably a Hufflepuff thing, and, heck, I wondered the same thing about myself and Ron sometimes.

"Maybe," I admitted. "On the other hand the Aurors raided a Death Eater safe-house yesterday and rescued a muggleborn that had been reported dead so..." I shrugged.

"Who?" Hannah asked. Apparently she'd been appointed group spokesperson.

"Ted Tonks," I said. "I know he was in Hufflepuff way back when, not sure what year. I think his daughter was still in Hogwarts our first year."

"Nym Tonks," Hannah said.

Nym? I had to remember that for a rainy day.

"You already know about Fred," I said. He took a deep breath and continued, "The DA also lost Colin Creevy, Parvati and Padma Patil, Anthony Goldstein, Terry Boot, Katie Bell, Michael Corner...and Ginny Weasley." There, I said it, and I felt like Dumbledore had force-fed me that vile green potion of Tom Riddle's. "Susan Bones," I forced myself to go on, "was reported in stable condition by the Healers shortly after the battle, but has since been reported dead."

Angelina made a sound of protest as Hannah slumped back against her pillows. Cho looked very pale under her bandages.

"Well," Ernie said in a flat, hard voice that really didn't belong to someone who looked like warmed-over death—I should know, it's a look I've worn enough. "Now we know."

I wasn't paying much attention to him, instead I was looking at Cho who had gone from pale to grey. "Cho?" I asked, moving over to her bed.

Okay, so maybe telling them the truth wasn't such a hot idea. Maybe especially since it had included telling her that four of the seven of her housemates that had joined the DA were dead...including the one that, at least so far as I know, she had been dating. Of course, that had been at the end of Michael's fifth year and I had never bothered to keep up with what happened as far as they were concerned. "Cho?" I asked again.

Cho really didn't look good, and the things that were whirling and spinning and stuff seemed to agree. The glowing spheres were shading more towards ugly-looking purples and angry reds. At a guess those weren't good signs either. No Healers were rushing in, but for all I know they were trusting their little magic gizmos instead of practical, sensible monitoring charms of one kind or another. So assuming—foolish, I know—that competent medical help is on its way, how do you keep alive someone who wants to die until they got there?

In the muggle movies I used to listen to from the cupboard under the stairs the Hero—yours truly—usually had some really teary speech at this point. One about death and self-sacrifice and how 'what would so-and-so think' that would magically (wink, wink) inspire those still standing (or lying in their sickbeds as the case may be) to keep living. I didn't have one of those. What I did have were three years of Oliver Wood Quidditch speeches, and another of Angelina Johnson Quidditch speeches, Ron's copy of A History of Great Quidditch Speeches (Oliver was in it, he'd gotten even better since going Pro), and several very scary incidents involving Minerva McGonagall with a fanatical gleam in her eyes and 'Quidditch' on her lips, to draw on.

"Suck it up, Chang," I said, putting on my best Fierce Scowl™ and trying not to laugh. After a certain point these speeches had always seemed more comedic than inspiring. "You take one spill into the pitch and you act like you're done for. What are the recruiters going to think? You won, start acting like it!"

She gave me a look like I had lost my mind, and her lips were starting to turn blue which meant that there was a time-delayed prank with her lunch, she was cold, or...something about not having enough blood...I think.

"C'mon, Chang, your death would be really inconvenient, and inconsiderate on your part, right now."

Still nothing, um...

"Fine," I said. "You know what you are? Selfish, that's what. Me, me, me, I, I, I...everything's about you. You don't care that your absence would hurt us, don't care that it'd make us less than what we are, don't care that you might have some middling degree of talent that I might possibly have a use for."

Angelina was making a wheezing sound. Probably would be rolling on the floor if she felt better.

"Harry—" Alicia's voice was a strained whisper.

"Angie's fine," I said. Cho was glaring at me which was better, but not by a whole hell of a lot. Still, time to mellow it down a little.

"You think you're the only person here who's lost someone?" I asked.

Her glare faded into a puzzled expression.

Ravenclaws, heh. Get them focused on a puzzle and it's half the battle won.

She looked away from me, to her right. "I'm sorry, Angelina," she said, "Ernie."

Angelina nodded tightly; Ernie just got this pinched look.

Okay, Angelina I understood. She and Fred had been dating. But Ernie? I shook my head and realized that Cho was staring at me.

"Ginny?" she whispered.

I nodded, feeling like I really needed to sit down. "Our breakup was for public consumption," I said. Never mind that I had thought that I meant it at the time. What can I say; I didn't get into Gryffindor because of my brains...that was always Hermione's job. "We'd planned to get engaged after Tommy Riddle's death. Better?"

She nodded.

"Good," I said, I turned to look towards Angelina who was still wheezing. "And you can stop laughing now."

"Laughing?" Ernie asked me. That was almost as stereotypical Hufflepuff as Cho's response had been Ravenclaw. Get them to focus on someone else and everything was right as rain. Heck, it was even working for me—at least it did as long as my Gryffindor side didn't keep reminding me of the truth. He turned to Angelina who was pulling herself up in her bed. "Sorry, Angie, but you really were that awful."

"Don' ca' me 'Angie'," Angelina slurred.

"Um," Hannah looked at me, then at Angelina. "What was so funny...if you don't mind my asking?"

Angelina began wheezing again.

"My fifth year," I said dryly. "Before I started the DA. Umbridge had taken to making sure that the detentions she was assigning overlapped the Gryffindor Quidditch Team's practice schedule. My dearly beloved 'Captain' really let me have it a few times, though she made sure that all of the ones after the first one were private."

"You cribbed all of that from Quidditch pep-talks?" Ernie asked.

Cho was sitting up a little in her bed and sipping from a goblet of effervescent potion that had been on a small shelf next to it. She didn't look as well as she had when I first came in, but she did look a lot better than she had a moment before.

I turned back to Ernie and shrugged as Angelina finally managed to stop wheezing.

"At least he chose to crib from you instead of Oliver," Alicia told her friend in a rasp. "This is it—"

"—th' bi' one—" Angelina slurred.

"—the one we've all been waiting for," I continued. "Oliver's pep-talks were all the same," I explained to the rest.

"She really said you had a middling talent?" Cho asked.

"Yeah, she did," I said.

"You were never a middling talent on a broom," Cho said.

I shrugged. "Now I am. Not good enough for any professional team to take me, not as anything other than a mascot. I spent too much time playing on brooms that were too good. Don't get me wrong, I'm good, but playing a school game of Quidditch or out-flying a dragon is different than professional-quality. I don't have that edge. Maybe I could have if I'd flown less advanced brooms, had been forced to develop my skills, that edge, but I didn't."

"So when you were talking about me, you were being metaphorical?" Cho asked.

"Well, I suppose there is one more bit of news," I said. "Kingsley Shacklebolt was named Minister of Magic. One of the first things he did was declare martial law which means our corner of the wizarding world dances to whatever tune he calls for the next year or so. The second thing he did was ask me to take over as Chief of Aurors."

The door flew open and a Healer burst in. I got out of her way as she bustled over to Cho, her wand whipping back and forth between Cho and the instruments over her bed. I moved over to Hannah's bed as the Healer began to pull out potion vials from a carpetbag.

"That's Healer Quinn," Hannah told me quietly. "She's pretty good, but doesn't allow us visitors. She doesn't want us to 'stress our delicate condition'."

"It's nice to find out they have some way of monitoring their patients," I said as Cho reluctantly began downing the contents of the vials. "Or was this part of a regular schedule?"

"Monitoring charms, I think," Hannah said. "How is everyone else?"

"Most of the DA was banged up but easily fixed. Professor McGonagall wouldn't let Dennis fight so he's safe, and Zacharias Smith left with the other evacuees, but everyone else was there. I know Vincent Crabbe is dead, but I haven't really sat down and read the casualty list. It..." I shrugged. "What was with Ernie?"

"He and Susan started dating last year when," Hannah shrugged.

"Damn," I said.

She nodded.

"I've never had to deliver news like that before," I said. "Telling people that Voldemort was back was easier."

"Do you know about any of the other muggleborns?" Hannah asked after a moment.

"I haven't really been in contact for most of the past year so I don't really know," I admitted. "Dean Thomas is around, Hermione too, Terry, as I said, is dead... I just realized how few muggleborns were in the DA."

Hannah nodded again.

"Anyway, we probably lost a third or so of our year, maybe more, dead or missing—"

"You," the Healer had turned from Cho and rounded on me with a hiss so fierce that I mistook it for parsletounge at first. "Who are you? What are you doing here? This is a Restricted Ward. This-This is an outrage, that's what this is! I am calling the Aurors—"

"I am the Aurors," I said dryly, producing my shield.

"—I'll have you in Azkaban so fast you'll have a nose bleed. People are trying to heal here!" she continued in a shrill voice that reminded me of Hermione in the week or so before the O.W.L exams.

I slowly drew my wand as her shrill climbed into a painful shriek, at which point I tagged her with a calming charm.

She took a deep breath to continue her tirade, stopped, let it out, then gave me a thankful look. "Thank you, Dearie, that was an excellently cast calming charm."

I nodded and offered her my shield again.

"An Auror? But you can't be more than—" She stopped abruptly, then looked up at me. "Are you really—" she breathed.

I nodded and held up a finger to my lips. "I'm incognito," I said.

Her eyes got really wide and she made this hyper-fast head-bobbing nod.

"I'm conducting an investigation," I continued on in my best 'I want to share a secret with you' manner—none too good, but the inhabitants of the wizarding world are, generally, easily duped. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't say anything."

"No," she whispered back, "of course not, Mr., er, Auror Potter."

"Would you mind waiting outside?" I asked.

She did, it was obvious, but she went and waited outside anyway.

"Chief Auho'," Angelina said.

"Is he insane?" Hannah asked.

"Desperate, I think," I said, really considering the question for the first time. "People trust me right now, for what that's worth. I have an outsider's view of what's wrong with the Ministry, and I've been vocal about it in the past. I also have a...middling talent for fighting dark wizards."

Angelina began wheezing again and there were a couple of small smiles from the other inhabitants of the ward.

After that there just didn't seem to be anything else to say. I traded pleasantries for a while, asked about the food—hospital fair, I had enough experience with Madam Pomfrey's version that I shouldn't have bothered. Finally I left, telling Angelina I needed a captain for the Auror's quidditch team for the inter-departmental pick-up league.

Healer Quinn was waiting right outside the door.

"How are they?" I asked.

She sniffed and started to reply, but I held up a hand.

"Generally, and only if you feel comfortable telling me and not as part of an investigation. They're my friends, I'm concerned."

Her expression softened some. "They're healing well, but they'll be in for some time. Ms. Abbott was the worst off, spell damage on top of blunt force trauma. The poor thing didn't get out of the way of a troll club in time."

I had a really hard time picturing Hannah as a 'poor thing', some of that probably due to the fact that her badger patronus was the only one I'd seen actually inflict physical damage. It'd taken particular exception to a table leg and had latched on and not let go until it had dissipated, leaving behind deep gouge marks.

"—regime of charms and potions."

Healer Quinn looked at me expectantly and I nodded.

She shrugged. "That's time consuming, not particularly difficult, and then only because we want to avoid side-effects of potion-interactions and the like. Ms. Spinnet will probably be here the longest. She managed to inhale a bit of an incendiary charm and burned her lungs away. It'll be a while before the new set is full grown in."

"Um, if she burned her lungs, and the new ones aren't grown in, how—"

"Oh we glamored up a pair for her to use in the mean time," the Healer assured me, "but they're only an illusion; in-out, in-out, you see?—she has no control over them and the charm has to be replaced every thirteen hours."

"Oh," I said. I decided then and there that I had no desire, ever, of becoming a Healer. Bones I could understand. Growing someone a new pair of lungs? Or how about using an illusion to breathe?

I thanked her and started down the hall to my last destination.

Ted Tonks turned out to be in an isolated ward that even my badge, scar, and authorizations (or autographs) couldn't get me on to. In a way it was kind of a pleasant surprise, in another it was more than



mildly aggravating. I mean, you go around without security anywhere you look for so long only to find it in the place that the whole side trip had been about.

Visiting the Aurors had been expected of me, was the right thing to do, and had mollified Travers. Yes, I had cared about them—at least a little—but they weren't close friends and, in the case of Dawlish, had caused me problems before (not to mention attacking my cat). The DA on the other hand, well, they were the DA. I'd played on the same Quidditch team as two of them since first year, and against a third. They had stood by me when Umbridge orchestrated her reign of terror, stood by me when Voldemort offered them their lives in exchange for me. Most of them had left me heaping mounds of chocolate during my annual spell in Madam Pomfrey's care. Visiting them was the least I could do.

Since I couldn't get in I decided to head up to the tearoom. I could likely apparate from there, and it would give me another way of gauging the attitude of the wizarding world aside from the chaos of the Ministry and Diagon Alley.

I managed to avoid Healers and portraits alike, only to find myself in a moderately crowded room filled with people lounging around with broad placid smiles on their faces. Apparently the only teas being served came with a healthy dose of calming drought inside of it.

A few witches and wizards that weren't under the influence were scattered around at various tables. In one corner at a table by herself, was a witch with heavy lidded eyes and long dark hair. I had my wand in my hand a moment before I realized I was once again looking at Andromeda Tonks. In a hovering chair next to her Teddy was making an enthusiastic mess of something green and orange, while his hair gently flickered through pastel colors.

I ordered us some tea, and had to flash my badge and sign an authorization notice to get a pot without a calming drought in it. It turned out that they were making the tea from calming droughts instead of spiking it, so I wandered over to the table in the corner while they set to boiling water.

"Is this seat taken?" I asked.

"I really don't want—" she stopped. "Mr. Potter," she said. "Or is it Auror Potter now?"

"Auror, for now, might not be in the near future," I admitted. "Some of the people who are supposedly in charge of me aren't exactly thrilled with my work."

"I suppose I should thank you for rescuing my husband," she said after a moment.

I shrugged. "If you want to. Honestly, I never was really comfortable with all the...adulation that people seem to be giving me, and since it is kind of my job now, if you don't want to make a production of it I really won't mind."

Her lips twitched in what might have been a smile. "I'll keep that in mind," she said. "Has there been any progress with bringing to justice those responsible?"

"I can't really comment on that, on going investigation and all," I said, "but not really. No. It's still early though."

She was quiet for a long moment. "Knowing my sister, you won't catch her until she makes a mistake. Very likely she will leave a long trail of bodies behind her before that happens."

"Yeah, I've gotten that impression of her," I said. "How's Ted? Given the way Tonks left when she got the message, I assume you sent..." I shrugged.

"Yes," she said. "A very interesting cat you have, she arrived just as I was about to go find an owl. Ted is much the same."

"Oh," I said. "I thought, well..."

"That he was dead?" Andromeda asked, arching one perfect eyebrow. The bags under her eyes from lack of sleep were less perfect but she acted like they weren't there. "No, they needed her for potion ingredients."

"Excuse me?" I blurted.

"Her blood," she said. "She is, after all, his daughter."

"I'm not following," I said bluntly.

"Do you know how blood replenishing potions are made?" she asked.

"No," I said.

"Do you know that blood has different types?" she asked.

I'm muggle-raised, not stupid (some people's opinions and certain test scores aside). "Yes," I said instead.

"General blood-replenishing potions need a little blood in them as an ingredient and work for all blood-types. More effective potions can be made for specific blood types, but require blood of the same type the potion is specific for. Ted has a moderately rare type, and his treatment is quickly exhausting present stocks of that blood-type. Nymphadora just happens to have the same type."

Which explained my missing auror, and why her mother had said that they were using her for potion ingredients. I nodded sagely. In his chair Teddy giggled and scrunched up his nose. A moment later his hair turned jet black, his eyes turned glass-bottle green, and a small thin scar appeared off-center to the right of his forehead. I reached up to my forehead, my scar was just left of center.

"Better hide that scar, kid, or people'll talk," I told him.

He gurgled and turned his eyes wolf-yellow. It was a distinctly unnerving sight.

A tea tray came fluttering through the air and settled down before us.

I helped myself to a cup, and loaded it with sugar and cream, and poured tea over the top. "It's real tea," I said.

She sniffed disdainfully at my tea (take the lady out of the Black family, but you can't take the Black family out of her) and poured her own cup with precise, practiced movements, commanded the silver tongs to add two lumps of sugar, stirred twice, and took a single sip before setting the cup back down.

Teddy offered me some of his green goop, which I politely declined. He pouted at me, then turned to his grandmother and waved around a goop-covered hand as his hair turned, briefly, bubblegum pink.

"Your mother is...busy," Andromeda informed him, but a smile leaked through.

He gurgled and clapped his hands. That was apparently baby for 'I'm done eating' because she waved her wand over him, vanishing the goop. Andromeda searched around in her purse for a moment and came out with the plush werewolf I had transfigured. Teddy grabbed onto it with small pink fingers that disappeared in the fur, and a moment later stuck the tuft of the tail in his mouth and began sucking happily.

"He really does love that toy," Andromeda said.

I nodded.

"Dora said that you transfigured it?" she asked.

"I had this bottle that he'd finished off and..." I shrugged. She seemed nice enough, but I didn't really know her and there were a lot of strange witches and wizards around. Going into the unhappy childhood of Harry Potter wasn't exactly something I wanted to do under the circumstances.

"It's a good piece of work," she said.

"Thank you," I said.

She watched Teddy quietly for a moment. "I was...uncertain when my daughter she was marrying a werewolf."

Funny that. In the muggle world the issue would have probably have been their ages. "The year Remus taught Defense Against the Dark Arts was probably my safest at Hogwarts," I said instead. "Of course, given the way he was run out at the end of the year when his affliction came out..." I shrugged.

She smiled, "You are much like Ted. He didn't see it as a thing to be concerned about as long as appropriate measures were taken. Fair enough, Mr. Potter. I, who had tried so hard and long to distance

myself from my family's prejudices, found that I shared those of the common wizard and witch. To be honest I was a great deal more than merely 'uncertain'. I was also wrong."

She looked at Teddy and the toy again. "I didn't ask her, mostly because I didn't want to know but also because the question would hurt her..."

It wasn't exactly hard to figure out what she wanted to know but didn't want to ask. "It matches Remus," I said.

"You saw him transformed then?"

"Once," I said. "It was very...memorable." I finished off my tea in one go. "I really have to be going."

She nodded. "Of course, thank you, Mr. Potter."

"Please, call me Harry," I said.

"And I am Andromeda," she said.

I couldn't think of anything else to say so I nodded and left.

I apparated to Grimmauld place. On a hunch I went up to the drawing room and picked up the five books Severus had entrusted to me and took them over to the battered couch. A word and a flick of a wand conjured a small glowing globe that would last a few minutes. The first book was a potions textbook, one that he was in the process of writing or had finished writing. I set it aside and opened the second book. It was the largest of the five, the size of something Hermione would check out for some 'light reading' with heavy catches to keep it closed.

"A Booke of Ingredients for Magick Brews and Elixirs of All Kinde, Their Preparations and Properties, and the Interactions Thereof," I read from the title page. It sounded like something that had been written centuries ago and would have been useful seven years ago, but the byline was also by Severus and it too was clearly unpublished. The third book seemed to be some kind of journal or diary; I flipped through a couple of pages before I set it too aside. I'd have to read it, but for now my time was short.

It was in the fourth book that I found what I was looking for—a compendium of Dark Arts, also written by Severus. It was fairly sizeable, only somewhat smaller than the book about potion ingredients. Lucky for me, back in our fifth year when the O.W.L.s were looming over us, Hermione had taught Ron and me a cute little spell in that would search a book for a specific word or phrase.

"Find me Sectumsempra," I muttered, stabbing the title page with the tip of my holly wand.

The book jumped in my hands, the pages quickly began to turn themselves before stopping two-thirds of the way through the book where a single word glowed blue.

"Sectumsempra," I read, "...variation of the cutting curse...whip-like execution...difficult to block...counter—here we go."

The couch shifted and I looked up to find Pixel staring back at me. "Feeling better?" I asked.

Purr. Head-butt.

"I take it that's a yes," I said, scratching her behind the ears.

Purr. Tail flick.

"You do know that you're supposed to be taking it easy," I said.

She flicked an ear, as though to ask 'what are you, stupid?'

I found a scrap of parchment in one pocket, and there was a beautiful silver inkwell with two large plumes on a side-table. I quickly scrawled down a brief note to Andromeda with the counter-spell and wand movements needed to fix the damage caused by the Sectumsempra curse. It was probably too late since Tonks and I had managed to undo the spell, but then the Healers might find it useful in the future.

I hoped we would never have to find out.

Pixel took the note and disappeared through a small hole in the wall that closed up behind her. That done I cleaned up the books, and

used the floo to fire-call my office. Only once I was sure that the coast was clear did I use it to floo to my office, including the extra tumble thanks to Routing.

Draco Malfoy, of course, had positioned himself so that I hadn't been able to see him from the fireplace and saw the whole thing. Instead of smirking, sneering, or making one of his usual comments he just looked at me, and then pointedly at his watch. "You're going to be late."

"We," I said.

He looked at me, and for just a moment his mask slipped. He started to ask something, but quickly schooled his features into a polite, blank mask once more.

"Out with it."

"Excuse me?" he asked in a board tone.

"You were going to say something," I said.

"I was going to ask if you still wanted me to attend the meeting with you," he said.

"Why wouldn't I?" I asked.

He raised one of his eyebrows in a carefully studied expression.

"Oh for the love of—" I grabbed his shoulder, spun him around, and marched him towards the door. "I don't have time for this."

"Get your hands off me, Potter."

"That's 'get your hands off me, Chief Auror Potter, Sir,'" I said snidely. "Get over yourself, Draco. It was annoying in school and it's annoying now."

"Bringing me to this meeting is foolish on your part," he said as we left the Auror Office. "I have no allies in the Ministry that you can use, and quite a few of them are upset with myself or my family. My presence will only antagonize the people that you need to bring around to your way of thinking."

"I'm counting on it," I said.

"What?"

"The wizarding world is too complacent," I said. "I want to shake them up, keep them off balance. The more they are reacting to me the less they are thinking about what I'm trying to do to them."

"You're crazy," he said conversationally.

"Possibly," I agreed. "Maybe even probably."

"I don't suppose you're going to tell me your plans," he said.

"I was thinking of saving them for a surprise, but sure, why not." We arrived at the lifts and I punched the button to call one. "First, Aurors are going to be responsible for dealing with Dark Wizards, same as usual..."

The Conference Room—unimaginative, I know—was a big chamber with high stone walls, a stone floor, and a stone ceiling that was marred by black smudges from centuries of smoke from torches mounted in stone sockets along the walls. A large circular table—wood, not stone—filled the center of the room. A crowd of wizards and witches filled most of the rest of the room—nobody was sitting at the table yet.

As Draco and I entered a wizard in a grey robe with a grey hood pulled over his head disguising his face, approached. "Chief Auror Potter." It wasn't a question.

"Yes," I said.

"I am Bob," he said. "Advisor to the Ministry from the Department of Mysteries."

"Right," I said. "That's not your real name, is it?"

He didn't answer.

"Let me guess, your real name is one of those Mysteries," I said.



He didn't answer that either.

"I need a way to kill dementors," I told him.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because I don't like them, and I don't trust them. And I think putting them and Death Eaters in close proximity is asking for trouble, but I don't have a better place to put the things."

"Ahh," he said.

"I also need to know everything that Rookwood worked on, or had access to, while he was a member of your department."

"We are aware of this," he said. "You ask for Secrets of the Department of Mysteries."

"Rookwood, and thus the Death Eaters, already have access to those Secrets," I told him. "I'll go after them without knowing, but if anything happens to my people because I didn't know about those Secrets, I'll be very unhappy."

"Your happiness is not the concern of the Department of Mysteries," he said. "But in exchange for your discretion where those Secrets are concerned, especially in any formal documentation, I shall see what I can do."

He turned and moved away.

"Nice to meet you," I said.

I wandered into the crowd, avoiding the people I didn't know and not really finding anyone that I did until I bumped into the father of a dead friend.

"Director Diggory," I said.

"Mr. Potter," he said uncomfortably, "I understand it's Chief of Aurors, now?"

"For now," I said. "I'm going to make myself extremely unpopular, probably. It might be interesting to see just how long I keep the position."

"I am sure the public will be very much relieved by you leading the Aurors," he said.

"I don't plan on being a figurehead," I said.

His face fell slightly. "Oh." He was silent for a moment and then said in a softer tone, "I imagine you're finding yourself a bit overwhelmed."

"More than a bit," I said. "Fortunately Travers is good at his job and Kingsley loaned me Percy Weasley and he's been keeping me from drowning in parchment."

He nodded sagely, "one of those hazards they never tell you about before time. If there is anything I can help you with, you'll let me know?"

"Actually there is," I said. "Two things, now that I think of it. I need you to loan me one of the Goblin Liaisons, someone who has a really good working relationship with them and preferably has a good head for money management."

He frowned at me. "Can I ask why?"

"I want to see if I can get the Goblins to help me go after the Death Eaters that are still out there," I told him. "Go after their money, freeze their accounts, maybe even seize some of it. It's just an idea right now, but..."

Amos nodded slowly. "Well, Chief Auror—"

"Harry, please."

He looked at me. "...Harry," he agreed after a moment. "You can try hiring William Weasley, you know his brother Ron and their father, I believe? He was assigned to us by Gringotts a few times to help clear up certain points."

"I already did," I said. "Unfortunately the Auror officer needs his skills as a Cursebreaker, it turns out it didn't have one when I took over. Until we can hire another one he's all we have and he never worked Gringotts financial side."

"I might have someone," he told me after thinking for a moment. "I'll have to check with him, of course."

"That'd be fine."

"How soon would you need him?"

"As soon as possible," I said. "I have some personal business with Ragnok tomorrow and I'll bring up the possibility, but the actual negotiations and establishing how things would work can wait a little. But the sooner we can get it approved, if we can, the better."

"Agreed," he said. "What was your second question?"

"My second question is who is responsible for investigating crimes concerning non-humans?"

"Well, it depends on the crime," he said. "The Werewolf Registration Office is in my department, for example, but refusal to register is filed under Administrative Law, not Malfeasance."

"Okay, but say a wizard murders a centaur," I said. "Do they report it to the Centaur Liaison Office or the Law Enforcement Patrol?"

"Murder a centaur?" he asked skeptically.

"Hypothetically," I said. "Who is responsible?"

"In theory the DRCMC is now responsible for investigating any crimes where a major party is considered a non-human," he said. "In practice such an investigation almost always starts in the DMLE and stays there, either in the Law Enforcement Patrol or the Auror Office. I mean, aside from the Werewolf Capture Unit and the Dragon Research and Restraint Bureau, we don't really have any field teams outside of inspectors who deal with magical pets and pests."

A gong sounded and people began moving for chairs at the table, and then the arguments started.

I watched for a while, then I put up a silencing charm that dropped the volume two or three dozen...whatevers that are used to measure sound. Effectively the noise level dropped to something like the World Cup when Krum caught the snitch. Draco was sipping on water looking rather bored with the whole thing.

"Is this normal?" I asked him.

"How should I know, Potter?"

I raised an eyebrow.

He scowled. "Probably."

"Okay," I said. I reached into my robes and came out with a thick folder full of parchment that contained Percy's Ministry Bureaucracy 101 and began to read my way through Chapter 1, the Philosophy of Bureaucracy. This was followed by chapters on 'How to File things where they'll never be found', 'how to submit memos that will never be read', and 'how to time your work so that quills snap and ink-pots run out so that you can take an unscheduled break while you are supposed to be fetching more office supplies'.

I was halfway through 'how to direct inquiries to anywhere except where you will have to deal with them' when I decided that things had gone on long enough and bundled the parchment back into the folder. "Did anything get decided?" I asked Draco.

"We now have an interim Director of Magical Games and Sports," Draco said. Even he looked a bit disgusted.

"That's okay, Draco, I've just thought of the perfect use for you," I said.

"Potter," he said.

"No, no," I said. "None of that. You'll love it, really. Just wait." I wanted to grin and cackle, but I've never really managed a good Evil Laugh. Maybe I should see about getting one of those Voice Coach people like Petunia got Dudley back when she wanted him to join the church choir?

Nah.

I stood, brandishing my wand and cast a rather minor charm that should have created a bright flash of light and a dull bang.

FLASH-ka BOOM!

The center of the circular table disappeared, leaving a ring-shaped table that would have been nicely symbolic if I knew what it was symbolic of other than I had put far more into that spell than I had intended.

Oops.

I stood up, the ringing in my ears slowly dying and I spelled the rest of it away with a flick of my wand. The spell had taken my silencing charm with it so it had to be even worse for them...which was when I noticed I had everyone's attention, which, I admit, was sort of the plan but...I had everyone's attention. "Yes, er, congratulations to the interim-Director for Magical Games and Sports," I said. Since I wasn't sure who that was I just swept the table with a look and continued, "Since we have decided nothing else of substance I am going to tell you what I plan to do, and then I'm going to leave you to argue about it."

It looked like they were about to start arguing again so I hit them all with a silencing spell, then undid it for Kingsley, Connie Hammer, Diggory, and one or two other people that I actually recognized.

"Right. First off, I don't have the people I need to do my job," I said. "To fix this I'm going to rob other offices for people I think can do the job or will otherwise be of use to me. Even if all they do is sit at a desk filling out parchment work, that's one more trained Auror I can have doing something that is actually useful."

"My second measure to increase the number of Aurors is to recruit a bunch of people fresh out of Hogwarts. I know them, so I know I can trust them, which doesn't hold true for most of you. I'll pair them with an Auror who has experience, and training will be fitted in to whenever they aren't out there doing a job that wouldn't be necessary if anyone had bothered to do their jobs twenty or thirty years ago."

"Harry, that's not fair," Kingsley said. "Most of the people here were only very junior members of the Ministry thirty years ago, if they were in it at all."

I shrugged. "Maybe it is unfair," I said, "but that doesn't mean it's untrue."

I turned back to the rest of the table. "Now, with all of these Aurors, I'm going to do four things. First, I'm going to go and capture all of Voldemort's followers still on the loose. I'll give 'em a fair chance to surrender, but I won't place their lives over the lives of my Aurors or anyone that they're going to be putting in danger or holding hostage or whatever.

"What happens then is up to you people, and specifically whatever judicial system you come up with. If you don't come up with something fair, effective, and uncorrupt, I will use muggle courts. I understand that appealing to muggle law is a tactic commonly used by the defense, but if you don't do your jobs you will find that I am quite capable of shoving power-dampening potions down people's throats and turning them over to the muggles to deal with.

"The second thing I'm going to do is investigate all of those magical crimes against the non-magical community that someone should have been stopping, and, aside from two men in an over-worked under-staffed office that investigated one small segment of crimes, everyone has been ignoring. You don't have any need to know how I'm going to do this, aside from the aforementioned judiciary. One thing I will tell you about, is that tomorrow when Kingsley and I have our sit-down with Her Majesty about how incredibly fucked up this all is, I'm going to suggest an exchange program. One of my Aurors to work with her policemen and one of her officers to work with my Aurors. That person, that muggle, will have full and complete access to anything that I and my Aurors have full and complete access to."

Draco sounded like he was drowning and the table erupted into noise as three or four people took down my silencing charm. One or two cast Sonorus charms to be heard over the rest. I drew the Elder Wand and loosed a silencing charm that dropped the volume to nil. Heh, maybe I will keep the thing around.

"The third thing I'm going to do is investigate any crimes wizards or witches against magical non-humans," I had played with the wording

and decided it was the best I'd come up with. I did, however, pause to make a note to sic Hermione on the problem. The trick there would be to stop her from coming up with any acronym associations. "Director Diggory," I went on with a nod to Amos, "says that he has, in the past, forwarded complaints to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and nothing has come of it. That ends today.

"The fourth thing I'm going to do set aside a number of Aurors specifically to investigate the Ministry, the Wizengamot, the Aurors, and anyone else in power that they feel like. Their mandate will be anti-corruption.

"For the past seven years I have watched friends taken to Azkaban without a trial because people in power needed to be 'seen doing something'. I have watched wizards and witches talk their way out of Azkaban claiming bewitchment and a hefty contribution to the coffers of those in charge. Maybe it was naïve of me to hope that such a move was unnecessary, that muggles had such people because they weren't...like us. The truth is, aside from their being a lot more of them and the fact that they have to work to do all the things we can achieve with a flick of our wands, they are exactly like us.

"Well I have had enough. I don't want the job. I don't think I have enough people to do all the jobs I've just taken on. But history has shown that we won't stop crimes committed by our people against muggles. History has shown that we won't stop crimes committed against goblins, and centaurs, and mer-people, and all the rest. And history has shown that we won't stop ourselves when someone rubs a couple of galleons in front of our noses.

"This is final notice, for you and for all of your people." I gave them all a stern look, then I turned and headed for the door.

Draco caught up to me in the hall.

"So what do you think?" I asked.

He didn't respond.

"Draco?"

He shot me an annoyed look and gestured at his mouth.

"Oh," I said. I snapped my fingers.

"Where the bloody hell did you learn that silencing charm?" he asked.

Hmm. Truth or— "You remember all that time I spent in the library with Hermione?" I asked.

"Yes..." he said slowly.

"Well I spent it in the library with Hermione," I said, and my inner Severus Snape smirked. "What did you think?"

"When the public finds out that you're inviting a muggle to come live in the wizarding world you'll have a riot on your hands," he said.

"Oh, I'm not going to invite anyone here," I said.

"But you said—"

"Hmm, I suppose I may have. Darn, I meant to imply it. Oh well."

"Potter," he growled.

"I'm going to suggest that I appoint an Auror to liaison with the Met. Since she actually does have some authority on our side of the fence, as it were, she'll probably accept," I said. "Assuming, of course, that she doesn't decide to just disband the entire government and start over."

Now that was a pleasant thought.

"And if she accepts you're thinking she'll appoint a muggle to liaise with us," Draco said.

"Pretty much."

He gave me a look. "That's pretty Slytherin."

"The Hat told me I'd do well there."



"Why didn't you?" he asked. "I know I would have if I'd been given the same choice."

"Because I had met you twice, and you managed to insult both of my first two friends," I said.

"I still don't like you," he said.

"Likewise," I said, and it was good to know that some things don't change.

He stopped so suddenly I was three steps past him before I stopped and turned around.

"What's your angle, Potter?" he asked. "Did you take one too many Cruciatus curses to the head?"

"Less than a hundred hours ago I took a Killing curse to the chest, from a Dark Lord that few ages have ever seen and none equaled," I told him. "I saw things that you can't hope to have the experience to ever understand. The truth is that I didn't need your mother's help. I won. He could have cut my heart out with a knife and I still would have won because I had taken from him that thing he most cherished. I made him mortal.

"I out-dueled him anyway. I killed the thing that sent you screaming from the forest our first year, that possessed Ginny and sent the basilisk that lived in the Chamber of Secrets loose our second year, that orchestrated my death in my fourth year and came so very close to succeeding, that haunted my dreams in my fifth year and then tried to possess me... I killed him. I have nothing left to prove, not to myself, and certainly not to anyone out there. The people that might have made it matter are dead.

"So no angle, Draco. No games, no manipulations. Just a job I've been asked to do, that I'm going to do to the best of my ability and if they don't like it they can get rid of me. As far as you go, well, as I said, Dumbledore and Severus both saw something in you that was worth saving. I'm not so sure. To me you're still that petty little schoolyard bully. Still, I've been wrong before, and Dumbledore and Severus were both pretty smart in their own ways, so I'm giving you a chance."

I smirked at him. A genuine smirk. I suddenly understood why he liked the expression. It was humor, but it was also power. It was having the other guy at a disadvantage. "There's your angle, if you want it. Prove me wrong."

I used a hand on the Elder wand to conjure up a puff of air as I turned. It wasn't as effective at making my robes billow as whatever spell Severus used, but it probably looked pretty cool. Looking unique was just as effective as an Avada Kedavra to the chest, in its own way of course. Severus' billowing cloaks and Albus' gold-star-covered purple robes taught me that.

Chp8